

No Unwholesome Word

(Ephesians 4:29)

With Study Questions

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Introduction

As a youth pastor I would run a summer camp on Catalina Island. I employed all means necessary to make sure anyone who was remotely interested in attending could make the trip. This included raising thousands of dollars and engaging in fairly aggressive and persuasive dialogue with teens in the community. I was, and hope I still am, quite evangelistic. I wanted these young people to have uninterrupted time to hear and seriously contemplate the gospel.

Often times, the cast of characters who participated were not raised in the church and had, what you might call, unseemly modes of behavior. One young man (we'll call him Jack), who I knew as a coach, was very temperamental. At one point he had been arrested for punching a police officer at a party. But we had developed a congenial relationship and he indicated a willingness to join us at our camp.

During the course of the week, you could tell that the message he had been hearing was beginning to work in him. But you could also see his natural struggle. He realized that if he were to come to faith, he had a fight ahead of him in terms of his temper. To be sure, there were many other issues in this Jack's life (as in all our lives), but he viewed his own temper as almost unmanageable.

Toward the end of the week we held a volleyball tournament at the camp. It was a very competitive tournament (our Junior High Youth Director eventually made the National Team and many of the campers played high school volleyball, some onto college). My team was in the finals and we were battling to win. As we were playing, I saw Jack sitting on the sideline right next to the court, watching attentively. My team lost.

As I began walking to the water to cool off, Jack came running after me. With unapologetic intensity he told me that he had been praying during the volleyball game that my team would lose. When I asked him why, he said, “Because I wanted to see how you respond to losing.”

Clearly, Jack had a history of not responding well to losing. He wanted to know how (at least in his mind) a godly person would react to an undesirable outcome. I remember thinking to myself, ‘How did I react?’ Earlier in my Christian life (a year or two after coming to faith), as a young college student I had developed a nasty habit during my collegiate competitions.

Even back then I was very evangelistic and when the newspaper would interview me, I would openly share my faith. If they were to take my picture, I would try to wear something that expressed my Christianity. But I had developed a bad habit. Every time I would fail in my event (I was a high-jumper), I would shout out a profane expletive. I would do this in mid-air, almost as a reflex. I eventually developed some management over that bad habit. But how did I do under Jack’s watchful and inquisitive eye? I couldn’t remember if I had cussed or not.

That was over thirty years ago. Profanity was clearly considered sinful. Yet it would appear that both the world and the church have been reevaluating their position on profanity. In this very room, I have little doubt, that for a large segment, it is a settled issue that profanity is wrong. And yet, it is not as easy of an argument to make from Scripture as you might initially consider.

Why is that?

No List of Forbidden Words

For one, there is no list of forbidden words in the Bible. Surely, using the name of God as an expletive or vainly is a violation of the Third Commandment (though perhaps not the initial violation of it), but what about other words? The meanings of words change with such rapid pace, any attempt at a list would almost immediately become outdated.

Coaching in a foreign, English speaking country, I used a term that, in the U.S., was perfectly acceptable in telling my athletes how to position their bodies. Afterward, one of the local coaches told me what that word

meant in their country and I was horrified. Even in my own country there have been words or phrases that in my era were entirely innocent that have come to mean atrocious things. I'll choose not to provide graphic examples, but in my lifetime bad has come to mean good and then bad again and sick means impressive. These are not dirty words, but hopefully you see the liquidity of the language.

Biblically Accepted Forbidden Words

Another difficulty is in what I call biblically accepted forbidden words. Words like "damn", "hell", or "fool" are in the Bible. If they are in the Bible, how can we say it is wrong to use them? It is difficult enough to come up with a list of culturally and generationally transcendent unacceptable words. But now we're saying that there are words used in Scripture that should not be used in our discussions.

Now we are getting a little closer to the issue. Because it is not that these words which we find in Scripture are unacceptable. It is the means by which they are used that makes them more or less unacceptable.

When Jesus chastises the Pharisees for making their "**proselytes...twice as much a son of hell**" (Matthew 23:15) as they were, He wasn't engaging in profanity. He was emphasizing a fact. The same can be said for "fool" or "damn". But what about using those words as an adjective, slang intensifier? What if somebody throws one of those words into a compliment? Instead of a simple "very", as in "That was a very good performance" they choose to say, "That was a *blank* good performance." Now we have a word that is biblically acceptable, but easily misused but then designed to intensify the compliment.

How does all this fit into our opening verse?

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29 NASB).

In one sense it can be used in an unwholesome way, yet the person is using it to edify. All this to underscore my point. It is not an entirely easy argument to make.

Strong Denunciations in Scripture

Let's now make it even more difficult. We all know there are certain words or phrases in our culture that seem to very accurately call out somebody who is telling lies or somehow falsely promoting something. The Scriptures are not without some warrant when it comes to aggressive language. We read some very strong denunciations of people who seem to deserve it.

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8).

We're so familiar with a verse like this that we may not appreciate that the Apostle Paul was likely using the strongest language available to curse (*anathema*) those who tinker, as it were, with the gospel. Later, Paul becomes even more graphic in his strong denunciation.

I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves (Galatians 5:12)!

Not only do we see strong denunciations, we also see interjections. These interjections are usually along the lines of "**woe**" or "**alas**". In a culture where there is such a strong desire to be unique and innovative (at which almost everybody fails), perhaps bringing back "**alas**" in your moment of surprise or frustration would set you apart.

Filthy Talk and Shameful Speech

It may be difficult to nail things down explicitly. At the same time, it is not as if the Scriptures have nothing to say when it comes to filthy talk and shameful speech. Things that should not "**even be named among**" Christians are...

...filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks (Galatians 5:4).

“Filthiness” *aischrotes* is that which is shameful, obscene and that which flouts social and moral standards. **“Coarse jesting”** *eutrapelia* addresses that which is risqué, vulgar or indecent.

But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth (Colossians 3:8).

“Filthy language” *aischrologian* is just what it seems. It is obscene talk, vulgar speech or that which is in poor taste. We then have our opening verse:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29 NASB).

“Unwholesome” *sapros* here gives the image of that which is rotten or rancid. Something you find on the back shelf of the refrigerator that must be thrown out. Conversely, our words should be good for **“edification”** *oikodome* which expresses the idea of building something or strengthening someone-giving grace. But Paul adds a little phrase (just one word in Greek-*chreias*) of which we should take notice. We should speak **“according to the need of the moment”** or **“as fits the occasion.”**

Fitting the Occasion

What the Apostle likely means with the words **“according to the need of the moment”** is that we seek to find the best words and give those words at the best time. Neither one of those is always easy to figure out. Some people like immediate encouragement and others like time to simmer. Some people like longer pep talks while some just need an affirming look or a pat on the shoulder.

But the main point I am seeking to highlight here is the need to have an awareness of our social environment. I feel I can be much less careful speaking with my wife in a secluded environment or speaking with the elders in closed session than I must be if I'm being interviewed on the radio. This is not because I want to be double-minded, but because these are people who know me well enough to not question my motives. Or, if they do question my motives, it is a safe environment for me to reevaluate my motives without having to clean up a bigger mess.

How does this speak to the issue of profanity? To be sure, there is certain language that is wrong in any environment, even the environment of our own minds. Thoughts and words which conjure up or promote lustfulness, ungodly hatred and anger are to be recognized and repented of. This is no easy task. James warns that **"the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity...no man can tame it" (James 3:6, 8).**

But that settled fact that it is near impossible to come up with a solid, immutable list of cuss words means we need to dig a little deeper and become a little wiser in order to obey the exhortations Paul gives regarding filthy talk (in this case, talk that is not promoting lust, hatred, etc.). This requires I be wise and sensitive to the ears of the people by whom I am surrounded.

Someone may approach me after this very sermon and use an adjectival intensifier to either affirm or denounce this sermon. If this is done privately (depending on the adjective) I may simply respond with a "thank you" or a "duly noted". But if it is done publicly, the responder would have to be a bit more selective regarding their use of words.

Summary

Let me seek to sum this up. Since the Scriptures do not provide a list of words or phrases (Third Commandment notwithstanding) that are prohibited, we need to seek to recognize within our various cultures, words that have become profane. We're not talking about words or phrases which are inherently promoting lust, anger, violence, etc. We're talking about words which to some people mean one thing and to others something else.

Since all of our words should seek to edify and bring grace to the hearer, it is critical that we use words suitable to the occasion and suitable

to those listening. Anything less is just self-indulgence and demonstrates a lack of self-control. In Jack's world, for me to break out in profanity after losing that volleyball game would have been a demonstration of carnal indulgence on my part. I needed to be aware of that.

Someone may argue that this all sounds like relativism or some form of situation ethics. But that is not at all the case. Certain types of language are absolutely wrong. It's just that it is not always easy to stay on top of which words or phrases fall into that category.

But this must be added: the way we speak will associate us with a certain aspect of our culture. When Peter was seeking to convince the crowd that the servant girl was wrong about seeing him with Jesus, **"he began to curse and swear, saying, 'I do not know the Man'" (Matthew 26:74)**. This is not Peter engaging in foul language. He is likely swearing that he doesn't know Jesus with a call for an attending curse. At the same time he must have recognize that this type of language would have, in that culture and in that particular context, disassociated him with Christ.

Unclean Lips

To this day there may not be anything that more vigorously reminds me of my own sin and need for a Savior than what proceeds from my lips, or what I want to say. It is in the context of our words justifying or condemning us, Jesus taught the mouth reveals **"the abundance of the heart" (Matthew 12:34)**.

When Isaiah was swept into the throne-room of God, it was almost as if he was supernaturally made aware of things he had said which led him to his own interjection, **"Woe is me...I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5)**.

We should ever seek to have speech that is gracious, **"seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6)**. Yet our own words, and the words of those by whom we are surrounded, should ever remind us of the need we have to our mouths touched, as it were, by the blood of Christ that our sin might be purged, and our sin taken away.

Questions for Study

1. When you evangelize, what aspects of your personality speak well of your testimony, which do not and why (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why do you suppose there is no list of forbidden words in the Bible (pages 3, 4)?
3. We read words in the Bible that are often used in a profane way. How does that happen (page 4)?
4. How does the Apostle Paul justify using such strong language to address certain people (page 5)?
5. Does Scripture address filthy talk at all? How (pages 5, 6)?
6. The Apostle Paul writes of talking in such a way that “fits the occasion.” What do we learn from a statement like that (pages 6, 7)?
7. What do our lips teach us about our hearts (page 8)?