

Swear Not At All!

by Staff

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"But I say to you, do not swear at all . . ." —Matthew 5:34

"What really bugs you?" During the Tabletopics session on a memorable Spokesman Club ladies' night some years ago, the Topicsmaster asked this question. I racked my brain for the duration of the topic, but I could not come up with a worthwhile response. Thinking about it later, after the club session had finished, it came to me!

What really bugs me, Mr. Topicsmaster, is swearing.

More particularly: swearing in public, swearing in mixed company, and swearing in the media. I am not talking about the type of swearing such as an oath in a court of law. That is a different subject altogether. I am talking about cursing, blasphemy, and profanity—in simple terms, bad language:

- » Bad language on TV, radio and in the movies.
- » Bad language in newspapers, magazines and books.
- » Bad language in music.
- » Bad language in our workplaces.
- » Bad language in public places.
- » Bad language in the world.
- » Bad language in God's church!

Bad language in God's church? Surely not!

It appears that some differences of opinion exist regarding certain coarse words that some church members judge to be acceptable and others find offensive. Despite our varied backgrounds, Scripture tells us that this should not be (James 3:10; I Corinthians 10:32).

God's people should not be using bad language. God says so, plainly, in His Word, the Holy Bible!

Sick of Obscenities

The following is part of a *Readers' Digest* article entitled "I'm Sick of the F-Word" by Anita Bateman. The author prefaces her article by saying, "What was once taboo is now the trend. It's time we said, 'enough'":

Recently some friends who hadn't been to a movie for years treated themselves to a picture that had received rave reviews and several Academy Awards. I asked how they

had enjoyed their night out. "It was a good movie," Judy said. "An excellent story line and great acting, but. . . ." When she hesitated, I had a good idea what she would say next. "But the language was foul! The foulest I've ever heard, and I've been around. Things sure have changed."

Yes, they have. Words once reserved for restroom walls are now common stuff in films, plays, books and even on television.

The "F-word," long taboo, is now high fashion. As columnist John Leo noted recently in *U.S. News and World Report*, stand-up comedian Eddie Murphy tosses out hundreds of four-letter words in a single performance; New York Mets baseball star Lenny Dykstra, in a book snatched up by many a young fan, uses the F-word the way others use punctuation; and David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, is littered with the you-know-what word.

Moviemakers are in the thick of the expletive explosion. But, whatever the medium, the message seems to be that foul language is in, so get used to it.

I realize there are those who contend that entertainment merely depicts life as it is. "It's the real world," they say. "It's how people talk!" Indeed, my friend noticed that others in the theatre hadn't appeared offended by the on-screen obscenities. In fact, the people behind her were using much the same language. "Is it us?" she asked. "Are we the different ones?"

I admit that sometimes it seems to be the case. Not long ago, I was sitting on a bus behind two women who apparently believe that no noun is complete without an obscene adjective attached. And many of us have worked in offices that can best be described as a locker room after a big loss.

Basing an impression on looks can be risky. Words reveal much more about a person. Wise employers know this. A business manager told me of an attractive job applicant who not only "dressed for success," but had the background and training to land a job with the organization. Why wasn't he hired? His language. Said the manager, "If he felt no qualms about using expletives in our interview, he'd probably use them with our customers."

Sadly, this applicant may have thought that profanity would make him appear tough and aggressive—leadership material. Not so. Such language implies an inability to communicate well and to discern what is inappropriate.

"But they're only words," we hear some people say. Only words? Words are the way we communicate our most precious thoughts—our feelings about ourselves, about each other, about life. No wonder they can inflict so much lasting pain. I will never forget the young woman whose mother once called her foul names during an argument. She later confided, "It would have hurt less if she had slapped me. I'll never get over those things she called me."

A friend told me about a commuter who grew so tired of the stream of obscenities coming from members of his car pool that he planned to quit the group. He tried to think

up excuses, but they all sounded phony. Finally, he decided that the others should know his real reason. He leveled with them. To his surprise, the two worst offenders immediately promised to clean up their act, and insisted he continue with the car pool.

I still regret that a number of years ago I failed to speak out as language pollution became the norm in a writing class I was taking. It began when one of the students asked our instructor if it was permissible to use a certain word in his story. "By all means," he said. "It's real life; it's how people talk." Soon others began lacing their prose with "real life." Of course, it wasn't real life at all, but what the students thought was expected.

I copped out by not objecting. I was afraid of what the others would think of *me*, fearful that if I spoke up I would appear unsophisticated.

What happened in that classroom probably reflects what is happening in society at large. Isn't language pollution increasing because we are too eager to follow what others tell us is fashionable? Because we are not exercising our right—and obligation—to speak out against it?

When a filmmaker I know put together a short documentary about his young son's soccer heroics, his mother was appalled to find the script riddled with profanity. "But Craig," she objected, "my grandson just doesn't talk this way. He never has."

"Oh, Mom, I know that," Craig replied. "But you've got to put that kind of thing in nowadays. People expect it. It's the *trend*."

I rest my case.

These are wise words from a lady with enough courage to speak out against the growing acceptance of bad language in today's world.

What Is Bad Language?

Bad language comes in several forms: cursing, swearing, blasphemy, profanity, and probably even more types. Because these first four cover most of the ground regarding bad language, we will home in on them:

Cursing is to call upon divine power to cause injury to another. It is related to damning someone.

We know what Jesus' thought of such curses by His response to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, when they desired to call fire down from heaven on some Samaritans who did not welcome Him:

Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son

of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." And they went to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

Swearing is to use profane or obscene language.

Swearing may have had its origins in Old Testament times when people sincerely called on God's name to back up an oath or a vow. In these times, the people of modern Israel have discarded God as well as the practice of making sincere promises, vows and oaths before Him; but they have retained His holy name to throw around as a common exclamation!

Blasphemy is the act of expressing a lack of reverence for God.

Surprisingly, blasphemy is still technically a civil crime in some U.S. states and in Britain. However, we understand that, with each passing year and the steep slide in morals, both charges and convictions of the crime of blasphemy have become fewer and fewer until today they are virtually nonexistent.

Profanity is the use of profane language, serving to debase what is holy.

It seems that many types of foul language are related to God or to holy things. The modern Israelite seems to think he is a real big shot if he can say foul things about God or what is holy and sacred without being struck down on the spot. The ancient Greeks called such overweening pride—the kind that drove Satan to defy God and try to replace Him (Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:12-17)—*hubris*. How far from God our nations have fallen!

Euphemisms

Certainly, church members are not using four-letter words or blaspheming or profaning God's name. In part, the Third Commandment—prohibiting taking God's name in vain—deals with such matters. Rather, the words that some complain about are of another type: mild or watered-down versions of God's names or crude words for certain body parts or bodily functions. Though this sensitive theme may embarrass or offend, it needs to be covered.

For those who might be new to this subject, it is necessary to give warning about "substitute" swearwords such as "gosh," "golly," "jeez," "shoot," "shucks," and others. Such words are called *euphemisms*, literally "good speech." It does not take much thought to figure out what words these exclamations are substitutes for. We do not need them! The English language contains thousands of benign yet descriptive words and expressions that convey the same feeling or reaction.

Yet for those whose speech habits are deeply ingrained, it can be hard. Many of us have used bad language freely and frequently before conversion. Many of us are surrounded by foul language at work every day. A friend told me that, upon starting a job "in the world" after spending four years at Ambassador College, he was plagued by swearwords constantly coming to the tip of his tongue for the least little problem!

I do not wish to appear self-righteous in discussing this sensitive subject. I am not pointing a finger at others. Like many church members, I work in an office where I cannot even enjoy a cup of coffee with my coworkers because the air so frequently turns blue with bad language and filthy subject matter. Some of the women are as bad as the men—in some cases, worse! It can rub off on us and,

like the proverbial frog in hot water, we can gradually come to accept gutter-language as the norm. We can become calloused to it, and we can allow it to creep into our everyday conversation.

How Do We Quit?

Although the Old Testament verses dealing with swearing permit a certain amount of respectful and sincere swearing of oaths and vows, they repeatedly and soundly condemn swearing of the coarse-language kind. As previously mentioned, the Third Commandment warns against blasphemy and profanity in Exodus 20:7: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

The prophets frequently cite cursing and swearing, along with other broken commandments, as contributing causes of the captivities of Israel and Judah. For example:

Hear the word of the Lord, you children of Israel, for the Lord brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint, with bloodshed after bloodshed. Therefore the land will mourn; and every one who dwells there will waste away with the beasts of the field, and with the birds of the air; even the fish of the sea will be taken away. (Hosea 4:1-3)

History is repeating itself. Our nations rush pell-mell toward a worse captivity than those suffered by ancient Israel and Judah in Assyria and Babylon, and our foul language is partly to blame!

What does the New Testament have to say on the subject? Jesus Christ gives clear instruction in Matthew 5:33-37:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord." But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No." For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.

Jesus says that His brothers and sisters should not even be using such *seemingly* mild exclamations as "Good heavens!" They are unnecessary, and more than that, Satan and his anti-God attitudes influence them.

The epistle of James has a great deal to say about sins of the tongue, including swearing:

Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. . . . If any one thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. (James 1:21, 26 RSV)

For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. . . . [N]o human being can tame the

tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. (James 3:2, 8-10 RSV)

But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation. (James 5:12 RSV)

A swearword does not have to actually come out of a person's mouth verbally to be a sin. If we allow these words continually to come, unchecked, to the forefront of our minds, then we are sinning! But what can we do about it? How can we stop ourselves from even thinking swearwords?

Using James 1:14-15, some have determined that sin develops in four stages. However many stages there are, we need to cut off the potential sin of swearing at the earliest stage possible by guarding what comes into our minds. Notice Paul's instruction to the church at Philippi:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:8)

Through His apostle, God tells us our minds should be dwelling on things that are true, noble (or honest), just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy. As much as possible, we should avoid things that do not fit into these positive, uplifting categories. If we focus our minds on good subjects, we will not have time or opportunity to sink into the gutter. Let the light drive the darkness out (John 1:5; Ephesians 5:8-16)!

In addition, we should ask ourselves these questions, all of which have a great effect on our thoughts and our words:

- » What kind of movies and television shows do I watch?
- » What kind of music do I listen to?
- » What kind of books and magazines do I read?
- » What kind of company do I keep?

Do they all pass the test of God's instruction in Philippians 4:8? Or are they, among other works of the flesh, liberally sprinkled with foul language? If they are, it is time to give them up, replacing them with material that is more wholesome. It may be difficult, if not wrenching, to do this, but if we truly want to be holy and pure as God is (I Peter 1:13-16; I John 3:3), we need to overcome these kinds of habits.

Jesus Christ is leading His church to prepare for His return, and by all appearances, that time is very near. We have many areas of our Christian lives to be working on, and this is a very important one.

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