

## WHAT'S WRONG WITH CUSSING? 4-11-10

(Ephesians 5) Some time back I received an email from a former member of our church, now living in another state and involved in a sound evangelical church there. This person was alarmed because on Sunday at her church they had a guest speaker who freely and openly used, in the pulpit, language that was laced with profanity. The speaker was a man named, Donald Miller, author of a hot-selling book among collegiate Christians named, *Blue Like Jazz*. In an attempt to be informed and with-it I read *Blue Like Jazz*, a book I now regard as both charming and dangerous. And yes, a Christian book that does occasionally invoke those typically taboo expletives. But Campus Crusade purchased 65,000 copies of Miller's book to pass out to college freshmen. This got me thinking. Then I heard a report from Bryan Chapell who is the president of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. Dr. Chapell was making observations about the student population presently at the seminary and he noted three things that disturbed him. One, he said, they were biblically ignorant compared to students 20 years earlier. He also reports that today's students are not willing to take risks for the gospel and finally that their choice of entertainment and language is often offensive. Interesting. What we call cussing or profanity, and really offensive language in general was hardly at all a part of my seminary experience. But the times they are a changing. And me thinks the matter is one we need to address. This came home again for me in my week at a conference in California. It was a wonderful conference, Christian based, but several of the people I worked with during the week used profanity in a way that I seldom here it in Christian circles. (pause) Is this change in the church a loosening of legalistic hangups? Or is it a trend in the wrong direction?

Let's begin our look at the subject of profanity with a passage from Ephesians 5:3-10

*But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; 4 and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not be partakers with them; 8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.*

I hope that last verse expresses your goal – that you are one who wants to know what is pleasing to the Lord, in order that you might live by that. And part of what we are told here in Ephesians 5 is that a certain type of speech, although common in our culture, is not pleasing to God. Verse 4 says

*there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting.* Other versions use words like *obscenity* and *crude joking*. The word translated *silly talk* is probably rendered better in the NIV where it is *foolish talk*. The Greek word is one you may recognize. It is the term *morologia* "Logia" means "words" and "moro" is the granddaddy of our English word "moron." Literally it is "moronic words." And then there is "coarse jesting." What's he talking about here? This is a description of lockerroom language isn't it? This is the way the boys at Hampton High talk as they put on their gym clothes. I've been around adults doing the same thing. But the apostle says this is not fitting for Christians. But still there is confusion among us about exactly what this means. Does this mean that profanity is out-of-bounds? Does this mean certain words are off-limits for believers? Not everyone agrees on this. So, as we begin to discuss it I start by addressing the confusion about profanity.

And I think I can start with my own story. I was a Christian from the time I was 9. I grew up wanting to please the Lord, and I was taught, as a Southern Baptist, that certain words were going to be off-limits for me. They were cuss words, bad words, naughty words. And I did not use them. When I was in elementary school, I hardly ever heard them. My friends were taught the same values as I. But when I transitioned to Jr.High a whole new vocabulary emerged. And it took me a while to figure it all out. I came to understand most of what was being said around me, but I did not partake. Until one day, alone, lifting weights in our carport, something happened, and a common expletive came shooting from my heretofore pristine mouth. I remember looking around to make sure no one heard me. I felt guilty, but not too guilty. More and more these words began to drop from my lips, but only on occasion, and then I went to South America. I was a part of an exchange program and went to Columbia with about 30 other young teens. And in Columbia we were taught to cuss in Spanish. And hey, I had not developed a conscience with respect to Spanish cuss words. So, there, in a context devoid of adults, I threw myself into the project and in the six weeks I had there, became an expert at Columbian profanity. When I returned to the US, I discovered that using American expletives was now much easier. My conscience about it was gone, and the only challenge became that of justifying it as a Christian. This I succeeded in doing. My justification was simple. The Bible nowhere gives us a set of words that is off-limits. These terms with which I colored my speech around peers, not adults, were not on any Scriptural hit list. As long as I avoided

the use of the Lord's name, which I did avoid, then I was okay. So, if you dared to reprove me for my language I was ready to assault you as a legalist, inventing rules not found in Scripture.

That's how I thought about it as an adolescent believer and that apparently is how a number of leaders in the church nowadays see it as well. The confusion over profanity is due, in part, precisely because the Bible does not give us a list of naughty words to avoid. And because we should recognize that, in and of itself, no word is evil.

In addition, there are some who are very disturbed over the mistaken emphases within the conservative wing of the church and want to get our attention off of cussing and smoking and drinking to what they see as more weighty concerns. Tony Campolo is a popular Christian speaker who is known for his occasional use of profanity. For years he would speak to audiences and say this, "A billion people on this planet do not have enough food to eat today. And you don't give a bleepity-bleep about it. And what's worse, is that most of you are more disturbed that I just said, *bleepity-bleep* than you are that people are starving." What do you think of that? (pause) I get his point. And this is really the major point of the pro-profanity crowd. They want us to see that there are much weightier issues for the church than profanity by its members. And I think this we must admit. Profanity, if a sin, is not the greatest of sins or the most destructive of sins. Possibly, there are some Christian sub-cultures that have made too much of it. I don't know. But I do know this. Plenty of church-goers who would never think of using cuss words in their speech will do much worse. They will attack and wound and destroy the reputations of others. Politely-worded slander is much worse than a profanity-filled joke. Okay? Two words that sometimes get jumbled together are the terms "cuss" and "curse." To cuss, is to use profanity, or expletives in one's speech. But to curse, as the Bible defines it, is to call down evil or judgment on another. James 3 is the passage that describes the tongue as a fire that can do great damage. And there in verse **8-10** *no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.* What James is opposing here is not filthy talk so much as attacks on other persons, which are much worse. So, hey, it is certainly possible for us to be too worked up about profanity vis-à-vis other sins. But that still leaves open the question of whether profanity is appropriate for followers of Christ. Now some will actually suggest that it is appropriate because it is the language of our

culture, and if we desire to communicate the gospel effectively, we must do so in the common language, right? And yet, in Ephesians 5, right after the exhortation to avoid filthy speech, Paul says *do not be partakers with them; 8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light*. Confusing? Maybe it is a little bit.

But let's move on to talk about the problem of profanity. As you might guess, I am not going to land on the side of those who promote Christian profanity. Indeed, I am going to suggest we avoid it. Why? On what grounds? (pause) Well, let me take you back to my own story. I did not become a Christian when I was 18, but in that year my understanding of the Christian life was dramatically altered. I got involved in a new church, established new friends, began reading new books. And among the changes in my life, one had to do with the cleaning up of my speech. Initially it was sparked by a change of friends, new friends who expressed that they didn't appreciate my vocabulary. But then I began to grow in my understanding of the Christian life. I learned that it is not just about obeying plain rules, but about applying principles and values of Scripture. I learned that it is not just about trying to avoid the things that are wrong, but about living in that which is good and positive. And then I got the great lesson on the purpose of speech and figured out that God did not give me a voice simply so that I could express myself, that my speech was to bless and build up others. As a result, profanity left my vocabulary and has really not been a problem since. But for you who need convincing that it is a problem I offer three reasons why profanity should be excluded from your verbal habits.

Reason one is that profanity usually demeans the sacred and the sexual. ® Have you ever given thought to the nature of our profanities? It is fascinating really. Sad, but fascinating that so many of the chief expressions of our anger or disgust involve the holy. God, Jesus, Christ – the most precious terms in our language are also used as expletives. Around the same time I was cleaning up my own language, I was also playing amateur jai-alai with people who were very foul-mouthed, many Hispanic and was fascinated that the primary expression of anger for Hispanic jai-alai players was *Dios!* which means *God* – a cuss word in either tongue. Clearly, the use of our Lord's name in this way is off limits for a believer, but just consider why the devil would promote such language. Is it not to profane the sacred? And diminish our fear and reverence of God? Young people now say OMG, "Oh my God" in response to almost anything. And are they thinking of their Maker and Judge when they say it? Of course not. Then there are the words "damn" and "hell." What do these

words mean? They are terms having to do with the most serious subject in the world – judgment and eternity. Are these things the devil wants us taking seriously? Of course, not. And so his strategy is to make them part of the vernacular of the profane, to get people saying them so lightly that they can't be taken seriously. Christians join sides with the devil when we make hell a part of our common slang.

And then there is the matter of the sexual. I thought about just using the word “sacred” for this point and not adding the term *sexual* at all because I would suggest that properly understood, sex is sacred. It is sealed off unto marriage and is the means by which God creates human lives that will live forever. In our culture, the last 50 years has witnessed a revolution. We used to not speak openly about this subject and that has problems of its own, but now... God help us. Now, we are in a sex-saturated society. And the result has not been the elevation of the sexual but the profaning of it. It has become ordinary, common-place, animal-like, and the sanctity of it is gone. We have lost so very, very much. And it is fascinating to me that so much of our vulgar language is sexual in its content. It is not so clearly wrong as the taking of God's name, but it is a desecration of something which God created to be pure and holy. To me, and to God, that is a problem.

Reason #2 why you should avoid profanity is because it tears down rather than builds up those for whom certain expletives have impure connotations. This is a major point, rooted in the lesson of Ephesians 4:29 *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, so that it will give grace to those who hear.* Here we learn that the purpose of our speech is to edify, to uplift, to build up one another, but profanity tends to have the exact opposite effect. Why? Because of those things we associate with obscene terms. The terms in themselves are not obscene or bad. No, no. But if they have impure connotations for us who hear them, then we can be defiled by them. That is why the use of certain terms will necessarily increase your heart-rate and get your adrenaline flowing and your mind thinking, but not usually in the direction of purity. This is why the use of profanity is simply an expression of our insensitivity and disregard for one another. It is not about words, but about people and how they are impacted by those words.

Interestingly, the pro-profanity party will tell me the problem then is with those who are bothered by the terms. They need to get over it. But that is not how Scripture seems to see the matter. Instead we are told to seek unto edification. In Colossians 4:6 *Let your speech always be with grace, as*

*though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.* To each person. Listen, how I speak to one person may be quite different from how I speak to another. If I can say with confidence that you are edified by certain speech, then I can rightly use that speech with you, but maybe not with others. And within a culture there are generally understood expressions that offend or defile a goodly percentage and so should always be avoided in public discourse. That is why certain terms are still off limits in public broadcasts. Even the broader culture recognizes the deleterious effect of certain types of communication.

*“But, pastor, this is the language of the real world! We Christians need to get with it and start speaking the language of our culture.”* (pause) Is that right? Is it? Then why does the real world restrict certain language to discriminating adults? Could it be that even though certain speech is common it is still recognized as impure and as improper, and defiling? Listen, when people know I am a pastor, they often apologize when they use profanity. When it became known that Dan Hendley was going to seminary, guys I had played basketball with for years started apologizing and cleaning up their speech around me. Why – if they believe it is so innocent? If foul language is really okay then why don’t people ever name their kids, *Blankity-blank*. Huh? And why, if this is really acceptable to the culture we are seeking to reach, have the politicians not figured this out and started mixing in some colorful terms with all their lies. You got an answer? I didn’t think so. The truth is that Americans want better from their leaders than they will do for themselves and, for the most part, they do know that profanity is not the better way. It’s impact on Christians and non-Christians is negative and that is a problem.

Third problem with profanity is that it typically flows from impure motives. Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:34 *You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.* What fills the heart of those who speak profanity? Why do we do this? See if you don’t agree with these three reasons. First, we use profanity to make an impression, usually to communicate to our hearers how intensely we feel something. And, in itself there is nothing wrong with that. I often search for ways to do that when I preach, but I don’t choose profanity because I know that although it may express my feelings it will not do so politely. But when my desire to express myself exceeds my sensitivity to you, then I say things however feels best to me. And sometimes profanity just feels good doesn’t it? (pause) But it is not the way of kindness or wisdom. Proverbs 15:28 *The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the*

*mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.* How about Peter as an example of this? There aren't many examples of cussing in the Bible, but this is an interesting one. It is the night of Christ's trial and Peter is identified as one of the followers of the Lord. How does he respond? Matthew 26:74 *Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!"* Looks like wrong motives to me. The selfish person just cares to express himself. The loving person wants to say things in the most edifying way.

Second reason we use profanity is to communicate to those who hear and to ourselves the message that *I am free and uninhibited and not afraid.* I think this is huge. And this is one reason why adolescents get caught up in such speech. It is a way of expressing independence, just like smoking or drinking. You do it simply because Momma said, "don't." And you have a deep need to break off the shackles of Momma. Mature men and women recognize this as a sign of immaturity, and childishness, but even some adults continue to cuss as a form of rebellion, as a way to somehow pretend you are boldly refusing conformity to the standards of polite society. You are your own man, free-thinking, tough and cool. (pause) At least your cussing is an attempt to convince yourself of that. Using this kind of language will also help you find other rebels. It is sort of code for the anti-authoritarians who can seek each other out and find companionship in their pursuit of some twisted form of liberty.

The third reason why people cuss is to offend others. This is not that frequent, but some folks will do it precisely in order to disturb their hearers. And the fourth reason for cussing is out of habit. The other reasons for cussing come from impure motives, but not this one. There may come a point when the original motives are gone, and all that is left is your typical habits of speech. You cuss for the same reason you speak English. But, the practice which is developed for the wrong reasons can be unlearned almost as easily as it was learned.

Okay, let's re-orient. We have spoken to the confusion about profanity, and the problems with profanity. Now, we come to our applications as we look at our responsibility concerning profanity. I offer to you four things we can do in response to what we have seen today. First, we can help create a culture of wholesome speech. We do that in two ways. First, by not engaging in profanity ourselves. Clear enough. But beyond that we can discourage it in others. That means you don't laugh at their crude jokes. It means you do like my friends did to me and let folks know politely

you would prefer they not speak in certain ways around you. Frankly, I don't usually do that with unbelievers unless it gets very bad. But I will do it with Christians. And you should too.

Our second application is to avoid vulgar entertainment. I am not going to argue that you need to boycott all movies that contain expletives. I don't do that myself. A movie like Saving Private Ryan may contain a great deal of realistic military-type language and still have a positive impact on your soul. But, comedies laced with profanity and crude jokes should be avoided. And generally, we need to be cautious how our entertainment choices are affecting our hearts and our language. If you see a need to change your patterns of speech you will also need to change your patterns of hearing, if you know what I mean.

Third application is to speak with a view to edification. This is the major principle to get. We don't speak to express ourselves, we choose our words based upon what will most positively impact our hearers. And it will be very rare that four-letter words will be your wisest choice. The point here is sensitivity to those who hear us. That requires some thought. It means you consider who you are speaking to and how your words will be perceived by them. And understand, they may be disturbed by terms that do not bother you. Is that just their problem? (pause) We are taught otherwise. In Romans 14: **13** *Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.* Let me offer you an example of what I mean. And I do so reluctantly, but I think this exercise may help. I was reading Leadership Journal this week, a respected periodical for church leaders and in it I ran across a recommended website that deals with church advertising. The web address is churchmarketingsucks.com. I stopped my reading right there and began to reflect for a bit. You see, for me, the use of the term "sucks" as an adjective is defiling. To me it is vulgar and obscene. I have difficulty using it here as a teaching point. But I realize that the culture in which I live has changed. For my son, this is not a bad word. For him, it just means something stinks, something is bad. But hey, I came from the generation that invented the adjectival use of that word; I think I know the guy who first used it that way, and I can assure you that it is not innocent. It has impure sexual connotations to it and I don't want to hear it coming from my children or my Christian friends. Now, you can think that the problem is mine, that obscenity is in the eye of the beholder, but you just aren't making the connections I make. And so, I would appeal to you under 35 folks to live in a sensitive way with us geezers. I don't think you are evil because you use this term, but if

you continue to use it in the presence of those it offends, then at least you are being unloving. And you aren't doing yourself any favors either. Consider the impact of your words on those who hear. Ephesians 4:29 again says 29 *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, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

Our final application is to seek cleansing personally and spiritually. The ultimate issue here is not what is on your lips but in your heart. Is their selfishness there? Pride there? Rebellion there? Lust there? What you say reveals what you are. Again Jesus said, *the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.* There is a very close connection between your speech and your heart. Look at Isaiah 6. This is the passage where Isaiah gets a vision of God on his throne, angels flying around and calling out. What were they calling out? *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Hosts.* And when Isaiah got a glimpse of this holy God, what did he say? Isaiah 6:5 *Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."* Can you say that? Maybe you can't say you have seen the Lord, at least not like he did, but if you are like me you can confess that you have unclean lips and you live among a people just like that too. You are in trouble and need cleansing. You need your mouth washed out with soap, or even better you need something like happened to Isaiah. Read on with me. Isaiah 6:6-7 *Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.* Pardon and purity. ® This is what we need too, at the very same point Isaiah needed it. We need forgiveness because we have used our God-given capacity to speak in a way offensive to His holiness and hurtful to others. But God has sent me to tell you too that there is mercy and grace to be found at the cross of Jesus. Go there now and confess your sin. Go there now and seek, like Isaiah, to have your unclean lips purified to become instruments of blessing and healing and salvation. Let's close with the prayer of David in Psalm 19:14 Would you say it out loud with me? 14 *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.*