

What does the Bible say about profanity?

Todd Stewart

January 2020

Many claim that profanity or “cussing” are a sin. Others maintain that words are just words. Historically, conservative Christian culture in America strongly condemned and tried to root out inappropriate language from the church, and even made proper language a functional measure of personal holiness. No informed Christian would dare argue against the claim that a disciple of Jesus is called to a life of personal holiness. However, Christian culture has often incorrectly seemed to define holiness as merely avoiding doing bad things. As a result, generations of Christians have felt compelled to say “shoot” instead of “shit” with no real understanding of what difference it makes beyond keeping them out of trouble with other church friends. What does the Bible have to say about the importance of our speech?

What is profanity? Are some words just simply evil by nature?

The Oxford Dictionary defines profanity as “blasphemous or obscene language.” Oxford also traces the term to the mid-16th century late Latin *profanitas*, from Latin *profanes* which meant “not sacred.” Thus, profanity originally referred to someone using irreligious or incorrect language (a.k.a. “common language”) to refer to sacred things. These are the Latin roots of the modern English term. However, the Bible was not originally written in Latin, and if we are to understand what the Bible has to say about profanity then we must delve into the context of the Bible.

Biblical Usage:

The Hebrew term *chahal* and the Greek term *koinos* are the equivalents of the English term “profane.” Both the Hebrew and Greek terms carry the meaning of “defiling, polluting, or treating as common.” In most instances the term refers to inadequate and unbelieving temple worship practices or ethically-compromised behavior. The concern being that the nation or individual was hypocritical or falsely attributing things to God that were not true. The clear concern of all these passages is to accurately present the character of God in word and deed.

The Bible and “Profane” Speech:

The primary claim made by many modern Christians is that some words are inherently bad and ought not be used (especially not by a follower of Christ). This claim is simply foreign to the Bible. I find no instance where a biblical author outlaws certain terms because the terms are inherently evil. Nevertheless, the Bible is full of passages that warn us about destructive and evil speech.¹ Below I will attempt to exegete a representative sample of these passages, and thus arrive at the Bible’s primary concerns with our speech.

Ephesians 4

I accepted Christ as a 20 year-old with a habitually “foul mouth.” After I was around Christian fellowship for a few moments, it became readily apparent that my vocabulary needed to be enhanced and changed. The first verse I memorized to combat my cussing conundrum was Ephesians 4:29 – “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.” I cleaned up my tongue

¹ The Bible is so full of warnings against damaging speech and calls for edifying speech that a full treatment of each passage would become too voluminous for the scope of this brief essay.

by regularly reciting this passage, and through the desire to fit in with and not offend other believers. However, years later I discovered that this passage was not written to command me to start inserting “shoot” or “dang” or “heck” into my vocabulary in place of the old terms. As with all passages, Ephesians 4:29 must be read and interpreted within its broader context.

Ephesians 4:25-32 says, “²⁵Therefore, putting away lying, **speaking the truth, each one to his neighbor**, because we are members of one another. ²⁶**Be angry and do not sin.** Don’t let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and don’t give the devil an opportunity. ²⁸Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. ³⁰And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. ³²And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

The overriding emphasis of the passage (and of the book of Ephesians) is living as members of one another who seek to relate to one another as God relates to us. Because of this higher calling, we “speak the truth” and use language that “is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.” In the context, “foul language” is bitter, angry, slanderous speech designed to tear others down, rather than “profane” words like “shit” or “damn.”

Ephesians 5

Ephesians 5:4 was also influential in persuading me to stop cussing: “Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.” Once again, context is key for understanding the meaning of this text.

Ephesians 5:1-5 says, “Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, ²and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. ³But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints. ⁴Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks. ⁵For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

As the initial “therefore” indicates, the passage above continues the flow of thought from Ephesians 4 (about living consistently with our new identity in Christ). Just as bitter and slanderous speech do not fit with the reality that we are members of one another, so “obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable” for our new identity. The speech referred to here is that speech which normalizes and prizes things that God says are destructive—such as sexual immorality². The person whose speech indicates that they prize those things is acting consistent with the old nature prior to the new birth through Christ (which is what verse 5 drives home).

² In the context of Ephesians 5:1-5, greed is also clearly named as a worldly value we ought not normalize via our speech.

Other Key Passages

There are various other passages that I could unpack, but they all end up more or less at the same place—the kind of speech that the Bible repeatedly warns against is speech that misrepresents God and His values, tears others down, sows division and bitterness, etc.

Does the Bible strategically use profanity?

The Bible is full of rich, meaningful, and very colorful language. Both OT prophets and NT apostles sometimes go to extremes to use metaphors that no doubt arrested the attention of the original audience, and which simultaneously cause many modern readers to blush. Consider the following representative example:

In **Philippians 3:7-9**, Paul writes, “⁷ But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as **dung**, so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Paul intentionally employs a “profane” word choice in order to make a strong point about how far short works-righteousness comes when compared to righteousness through Christ. He says he considers all his old religious works and unblemished heritage to be like “dung.” Except “dung” does not fully deliver the force that Paul’s word choice originally dealt. The Greek word is *skubalon*, which can mean any of the following “any refuse, as the excrement of animals, offscourings, rubbish, dregs.” But even that range of meaning does not fully reach the mark according to my New Testament and Greek professor³ who maintained that a better translation of *skubalon* in this context would not be “dung”, but would rather be something like “the shittiest shit stuck at the bottom of the shit canal.” Strong language to make a strong and critical point about the importance of finding our righteousness in Christ and what He has done for us.

In addition, I encourage the reader to investigate the following passages:

Ezekiel 23:11-21 – an example of God’s people’s unfaithfulness being colorfully compared to a prostitute.

Galatians 5:12 –Paul refutes those who were pestering the Galatian Christians with the false teaching that they had to be circumcised to be saved. In his refutation, Paul calls on teachers who insist on circumcision (“cutting around”) to just go ahead and chop their own off!

³ F. Alan Tomlinson, who was a conservative scholar at the conservative Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Some simple, biblical conclusions

1. The Bible does **not** teach that words are “profane” or “evil” in their own right. It depends upon how they are used and to what effect.
2. The Bible **does** teach that words are important and have tremendous impact upon others. Thus, we are to seek to “encourage one another and build each other up.”
3. We **should** be sensitive to our audiences, seeking to both avoid offense and also “become all things to all people so that we can win some.”
4. As James 3:1 states, teachers of the Word should be especially careful not to add unnecessary distractions to their teaching because teachers will be evaluated more closely. Thus, “profane” language should be used wisely and sparingly.
5. We should proactively use our speech to communicate God’s truth with others rather than obscure it!