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Profanity and the Name of God – the use and misuse of power words.

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What a gift it is that God has given us the ability to speak and communicate. He has given us words. At Babel, He confused the languages. But out of that punishment, He blessed the people of this world. Human beings always seek to simplify and dumb-down the way in which we communicate. I believe that human language is one of the best arguments for God being the Creator and the accounts of Genesis being accurate. Take the Greek language. When the New Testament was written, your typical Greek verb had over 400 different forms depending on what you wanted to say. Was it past, present, future, singular, plural, etc.? But that is nothing. Back in the days of Homer, Socrates, and Plato, there were over 600 forms of each verb, because they had an entire set of dual forms. That is, you had singular, you had plural (which meant three or more of something), and if you were referring to two of something, there was an entire set of verb forms just for that.

Needless to say, over time, the Greeks simplified their language and got rid of the dual forms. As a student of New Testament Greek, I am very thankful. Modern Greek is radically simpler than New Testament Greek. Throughout history, humans have sought to simplify the way in which we communicate. It begs the question, how did language get complex in the first place. The only logical answer is that it came from God. No culture would allow their language to evolve to the point where there were over 600 forms of each verb. We always seek to simplify. This is why texting is so popular – which frightens me.

Language skills, especially the level of vocabulary, displayed by the youth in our culture is disturbing. In 1970, the average 8th grade student had a vocabulary of 25,000 words. In the year 2000, the average 8th grade student had a vocabulary of 10,000 words. I have a theory as to why the language skills of seemingly bright young minds is not where it once was – or I believe should be. We learn to speak by listening to those around us. We remain ignorant to words unless we first hear or read them. Usually, we do not incorporate words into our everyday language unless we hear or read them a number of times. When I listen to the everyday language of the people in our community and culture, I notice the abundant use of cursing and swearing from a large percentage of both the church and unchurched. And I believe that this practice is a primary culprit in the dumbing down of our children's language skills. This, coupled with television's vulgar, brainless drivel that often passes for entertainment, makes it is easy to see why college graduation requirements are less difficult than college entrance requirements were 100 years ago. The problem I am addressing is not limited to our community. But rather, I am lamenting the ease with which our community has given in to our culture.

As I stated before, we learn to speak by listening to those around us. And we learn to

communicate by using words that get people's attention. Children tend to learn early in life that using profanity gets a rise out of people. When a child curses for the first time, parents pay attention. Even if the reaction of the parent is negative, the fact that attention is gained does not go unnoticed. Profane words are power words. However, speaking power words are like telling a joke: if the joke you tell the first time gets a laugh, this is the desired reaction. But if you repeat the same joke again and again to the same audience, it loses its punch. By the third time a person hears it from you, they consider you to be annoying or just plain stupid. The same scenario has occurred with the use of profanity. As a child, swear words got a reaction whenever they were spoken, but then the desired reaction subsided. So the next logical step, or in this case illogical step, is to include greater amounts of profanity and increasingly worse words. The result of this is that many people pepper every, or nearly every, statement with the most vulgar language available so as to lend power to what they say. However, just like with the person who tells the same old joke day after day, rather than gaining a desired reaction, listening to the person simply becomes annoying.

Because so many within our community solely use profanity as their power words, their vocabulary skills never branch out. They begin every sentence with "Oh my God", or with a nod and a wink say "Gosh" instead. Who do we think we are fooling? There are many who only use one adjective beginning with the letter "f". This has such a negative effect on our lives. First and foremost, this is displeasing to God. How much more clearly could our Lord explain His displeasure at the misuse and vain use of His Holy Name – the ultimate of all power words? The Second Commandment should leave no doubt as to the reverence with which we should honor God's Name and only call upon it in meaningful situations. Instead, His Name gets thrown into every meaningless conversation, every moment of surprise or disgust, and is called upon to damn so many people and inanimate objects that, if He granted all such requests, hell might already be full. There would be no cars or hammers left on earth. Think about all the objects which people demand God to damn into hell.

To those who treat God's Holy Name as something cheap and common, our Lord gave a warning: Jesus said, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" [Mt. 12:34a-37].

St. Paul had this warning for the church in Ephesus: "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" {Eph. 5:4-5}.

I know that people are able to speak intelligently, meaningfully, and with power without the use of vulgarity. I know this because, when I am present, most people make a concerted effort to hold

back their usual coarse language. Once when I was playing volleyball, an acquaintance of mine temporarily forgot that I was around until after he had called upon God to damn an inanimate object into the abyss of hell – as if his inability to hit the volleyball over the net was the volleyball's fault. He then told me that he was sorry for saying that in front of me. To which I responded, "Don't apologize to me. I am not the one you ultimately offended." I find it both humorous and sad that people are concerned about not offending my ears, yet God's ears, which hear all things, are given no consideration.

However, offending God is not the only negative to relying upon profanity for power words. The members of our community suffer generally and the members of your family suffer specifically. We are all called to be witnesses of the truth and grace of God which becomes very difficult to find when mixed in with coarse language and obscenity. But, even beyond the spiritual harm done to those who listen to such speech, there is harm done to our children's ability to succeed and prosper in life. Those who are perceived to be annoying or stupid rarely excel. The proverb holds true: "Vulgarity is the weak man's attempt to appear strong."

Apart from those suffering from mental debilitation and can't control what they say, there are only four categories of people who use profanity as their common language:

- 1) Children – they do it for attention.
- 2) Those who lack the intelligence to communicate. They pepper or punctuate each statement with what they perceive to be power words in a misguided attempt to be heard.
- 3) Those who are too lazy to work at expanding their vocabulary and find new or better power words.
- 4) Those who are evil and have no respect for God and His will.

My challenge to all who read or hear this is to either eliminate the annoying use of profanity from your common language, or upon using a vulgar tongue, please announce in which of the four categories you belong so that we may better understand you as a person. I write this with just a hint of sarcasm. I know that it is not a lack of intelligence that leads most people to rely upon profanity to draw attention to their words. We have become lazy in our struggle with the vulgar, profane world in which we live and freely join the heathen in their lifestyle.

But it is the willingness to join ourselves to the heathen lifestyle and lower our standards to that of the world's which causes much concern for the spiritual well-being of us all. I am not crusading to remove every hint of crudity or "bathroom humor" from society. I do not wish to return to the Puritan days of 17th Century New England. Moralism and legalism are also destructive. However, the misuse of God's Name is clearly a spiritual concern. The world excuses the general lifestyle of blasphemy and profanity. Scripture demands our life to be one of honor and reverence for God. The apostle John

wrote, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” [1 Jn. 2:3-4]. This statement is not one requiring perfection in keeping the commandments. In that same letter, John wrote, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” [1 Jn. 1:8-9]. Therefore, we have all sinned and rely solely on the forgiveness of God as the only path to righteousness. However, the person who makes little or no attempt at keeping God’s commands, but still wants to be considered as one who knows God, has a faith that is a lie.

The warnings of Jesus, Moses, St. John, and St. Paul are not idle chatter. It is through our words that we confess who we are and what we believe. If what we believe is that God’s Name is of so little importance that it can be thrown around and dragged through the dirtiest gutter of conversations, then I do not see how faith is present in that heart. Martin Luther is correct in his explanation of the commandments when he tells us “We should fear and love God...” I fear that far too many among us have no fear of God and have grown secure in their sinning.

We certainly have “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love” [Jonah 4:2]. But He cares greatly about His Name being revered and respected, and clearly from Scripture, God does not tolerate the kind of language that is all too common in our world. Listen to what Christ our Lord said, “But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” [Mt. 5:34-37].

The ability to communicate is a gift from God. The fact that we do not just “moo” like cattle is a demonstration of His love for us. We are able to talk to one another, join together for worship, praise God, and speak to Him. And He has promised us that He is always listening. My prayer is Christ’s prayer: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed by Thy Name...”