

I Was Just Wondering...Is It Ever Okay to Swear?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

November 5, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

Ephesians 4:29-5:4

Today's question is, "Is it okay for a Christian to swear?" I want to address this question as it relates to foul language. When we talk about swearing, we sometimes mean taking God's name and vain: using the name of Jesus, the name of God as an expletive or an exclamation. You know what I'm talking about: OMG or GD and all the other curses that involve the Lord's name. Those are bad, but I don't want to spend too much time on those because for the most part, people in our community know those are bad and avoid using those expressions. Today I want to address this issue by talking first and foremost about foul language. All those off-color, coarse expressions that people use to pepper their speech. Those 4-letter words and all their variants. Is it OK for Christians to use those?

To get at that question and to help uncover the spiritual/biblical principles that can guide us here, let's talk about one particular cuss word that is particularly popular these days. Let's talk about the f-bomb. When I was a kid I went to a Christian elementary and middle school and a public high school. Our little Christian school had only about 120 people in it from K-8, so everyone kind of knew everyone else's business. That meant there wasn't a whole lot of swearing. This was Canada, so there was some low-level cussing, but the mother of all curse words was not much heard. If you did hear it, it was a BIG deal. Everyone would stop and look at the person and say, "WHAT did you just say!"

After my little grade school, I went to a big public high school, Frontenac Secondary School, enrollment of 1500. Let's just say that kids there were not so careful about their language. The f-bomb echoed throughout the halls of that school. It came from the mouths of the boys, it from the mouths of the girls. It came out of the mouths of the jocks in the locker room, it came out of the mouth of nerds in the library. It came out of the mouth of the coaches on the football field. You heard it so often you began to wonder if this might actually be the school motto.

I think we all know this phenomenon isn't unique to public high schools. This word is widely used in the world out there. Watch any sporting event these days and if you have any ability to read lips at all, you'll know that it's a favorite among players and coaches alike. Presidents and senators have been caught on tape swearing up a storm. And in the world of popular music, the f-bomb has become a favorite lyric. It's out there so much that some have even speculated that the f-bomb is becoming socially acceptable, and others have said that we shouldn't worry too much about it, we should get over ourselves and not be so sensitive.

And why should we worry about it? It's just a word after all. Just a sound. A bit of noise. Four letters. One syllable. It's just a word. A bit of air moving across your vocal chords. Maybe some of you older folk remember the comedian George Carlin. He used to talk about this. He had a bit called the 7 words you couldn't say on television and one of those 7 words was the f-bomb. The point of his bit was: why are people so sensitive? Here's a quote: "These words have no power. We give them power by refusing to be free and easy with them. We give them power over us. They really, in themselves, have no power." It's just a word! How much damage can you do by sending a few sound waves out into the world!?

Well I disagree with George Carlin and I'd like to talk about that today. I want to do that at several levels. At the most obvious and straightforward level we could just dismiss foul language based on the Bible. We could just say that swearing is bad because the Bible says so. And it does: Ephesians 4:29 - "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." Ephesians 5:4 - "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving". Colossians 3:8 - "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." James 3:10 - "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be." I think these passages are pretty clear. And maybe that's all we need to say. The Bible says foul language and obscene talk is bad, so don't use it people!!! Enough said! Let's sing a hymn and go home.

But I would like to go a little deeper than that. There is a reason that words like the f-bomb are bad. God doesn't just make random rules; there are reasons for his laws. God's law is life giving; it is the way of life. God's law is also the way of love. All the laws are summed up by love God and love your neighbor, so that means if you refuse to use the F-bomb, you won't just be obeying God, you will be loving your neighbor better, you will be loving the world better. Our life and the life of our neighbor will be better if we don't use foul language like the f-bomb.

How can that be? Well this will get us to the heart of the matter. Christians should avoid using words like the f-bomb because, like all coarse language, it degrades life, it degrades goodness, and it takes the meaning out of things.

Let me explain. We all know what the f-bomb stands for. This particular four-letter word is another word for sexual intimacy. It's a crude word for the closest of intimacy enjoyed by a man and a woman in marriage. Now, without going into a long theology of sex, let me briefly say what I think you already know: Sex is a good gift of God. God gave us the good gift of sex to create intimacy, to create human life and to bring color and spark to a marriage. In that sense, properly practiced sex isn't just a physical thing; it's spiritual. It affects your emotions, your soul, your spirit. And when it happens in the context of a marriage, it creates joy and stability and trust and, literally, life.

When a person takes this good, life-given gift, and calls it the f-bomb, what happens? That word strips away all the soul and all the emotion and all the intimacy out of sex, and reduces it to just the physical act. The f-bomb is a word that is almost custom-designed to take all the holiness, all the goodness, all the meaning, out of sex. It's a word designed to make sex into a meaningless physical act. No one would ever use the F-bomb to refer to two people coming together on their wedding night! People use it to describe one-night stands and meaningless hook-ups. You only use this word to refer to sexuality when you want the act to mean nothing. The word itself has an air of hardness, meaninglessness, emptiness. It's a word that's designed to take the sacred and the holy out of a good thing.

That's reflected in the way people use it. Most of the time when I heard the word used by people in the halls of my high school, they weren't using the word to refer to sex at all. So why were they using it? They were using it for its hardness. It wasn't the word's meaning that was important, it was its tone. They wanted to convey hardness, callousness, meaninglessness. This word that drains the sacredness and the meaning out of sex can be used as a way to drain the sacredness and meaning out of anything.

All coarse language does this. Many of you probably know that in wartime soldiers are trained to dehumanize their enemies. One of the best ways to do that is through language. You call your enemy a small nasty name so that they will seem less than human to you. That way you won't feel so bad when you shoot them. You probably know some of these names. In WW2 your enemies were not Germans they were Krauts. In the Vietnam War the opposing Vietnamese soldiers weren't Vietnamese persons, they were Gooks. In the Iraq war do you know what the opposing Iraqis were called? Hajis or sometimes towelheads. These words are designed to drain the sacred out of the person, to make your enemy less of a person and more of an animal, or a thing; it makes it easier to pull the trigger.

What Jap and Gook and Kraut do for people, the f-bomb can do for just about anything. It is an all-purpose holiness remover. It takes the spiritual dimension out of things. Use it as an adjective to modify a person, place or thing, and that person, place or thing, just got a little harder, a little less sacred. It becomes less like something you should treasure, something you should take care of (as God instructed Adam and Eve in the garden), and now it's something you can manipulate, something you can use up and throw away if you want.

So all coarse language strips the holiness and goodness away from things. You can see that Paul understands that when we see what he recommends as the opposite of coarse language. In verse 4 of our passage, what kind of speech does Paul recommend instead of coarse language? Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving moves in the opposite direction of coarse language. Coarse language strips away the holiness and beauty of a thing. Thanksgiving exalts and emphasizes the goodness and beauty of a thing. Think what happens when you give thanks for your Mom's molasses cookies. "Mom these molasses cookies are great, they have just the right level of soft and the nutmeg and the cloves are perfectly balanced. Thank you for making them." What are you doing when you give thanks for those cookies? You are loving them well and loving your mother well. You are

celebrating a little bit of the world's creational goodness and lifting it up. You are pointing out yet another good thing in God's good and beautiful world.

Which gets us to the positive side of this sermon. I've talked about the destructive side of coarse language, but even as the Bible warns us against the danger of coarse language, it celebrates the power of language to create goodness. So let me close with two positive things that can come from avoiding coarse language and using our words for other purposes.

First, don't underestimate the power of being the kind of person who doesn't use the f-bomb. If you are the kind of person who plays on your travel soccer team and never uses the f-bomb, if you are a person who goes to a public university and never uses the f-bomb, if you are a person who works on a construction job site and never uses the f-bomb. People will notice. You will be a witness. People will be drawn to you. I had a friend in my previous church who went to the University of Michigan. He took biology and he hung out with his friends and he went to coffee house concerts with his friends, most of whom were not Christians. Virtually all of his friends were major f-bombers. They swore a lot. My friend hung out with them, but he never used the word.

One day one of his friends, in a quiet, serious moment said: "Dude, how come you never swear. You never use those words. What's up?" He asked the question with genuine curiosity. Scott explained humbly that he was trying to be more positive in his speech and he attached that to his Christian faith. It opened the door to a long spiritual conversation with an unbelieving friend. For Scott's buddy, having a friend who didn't swear all the time felt different. Different in a good way. More positive. He could sense a different Spirit there, not a coarse hard spirit, but a person who valued life. As you go out into the world, simply by keeping your tongue from coarse language your life can be a sign of Christian hope.

Second positive thing: Remember that your words are some of the most powerful things you have. Your words have enormous life-giving power. The saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me' is NONSENSE. I had a friend who was told in first grade by a fellow student that he was a bad singer. 'You sing funny! You're no good.' Those words got into his ears and then into his head and then into his heart, and he stopped singing. He never sang again. He went to the same church as me, and everyone else would sing and Doug just stood there. In school the whole class would sing, but not Doug. You can argue that he overreacted, and I think that's probably right, but that story shows the power of words.

This power shouldn't surprise us. Think about how God created the world. How did God make this world? Through words. And God said, let there be light! And, boom, there was light. God created the world by speech.

That's what our words do for people!! Our words create worlds for people. When that fellow student told my friend he couldn't sing, it created a world for my friend, and my friend lived in that insecure world all through the rest of his school years. When a parent keeps telling a child that they're annoying and disappointing and useless, they create a world for that child, and that child can have a terrible time escaping it. And the scary thing is sometimes the parent only has to say it once. But it works the other way too. When we take the time to bless the people around us with our words, we can create a new reality for that person. Just say something true and kind to another human being and you can open doors, you can create paths, you can build a shelter for them, you can shine light into their dark places.

Just think of the world creating powers of these words. I love talking to you, you are a really good listener. I'm proud of you. You are always kind to other people and I really appreciate that. I think you're beautiful. You're really talented! You could really be a great scientist. Have you ever considered going into the ministry? Or think of what it means in a romantic relationship when the other person finally says, I love you. When people say these words to other people, when people say these words to you, they are not just sounds; these statements create a hopeful world for the other person to inhabit.

Let me close by reminding you of the words that have been spoken over you. These are words that God has spoken to you, words that have formed your reality. Nothing in heaven and earth can change the reality of these words. God says to you: "I have called you by name and you are mine. Do not be afraid." God says to you, "You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter. In you I am well pleased." Jesus says to you: "In this world you will have trouble. Fear not. I have overcome the world." God says to you, "neither life nor death

nor anything else in all creation will separate you from my Love.” I don’t know about you, but these words are my world. I live inside these words every day. They remind me that I belong to Jesus and my world is full of love. These words shape the reality of my day and I hope they are the words that shape the reality of my speech, because they come from the one who is the Word made flesh. Jesus, my Lord. And yours too.

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