

Do We Even Know What Bad Language Is Anymore?

Everybody has always lived in changing times. But we *really* live in changing times! The speed and quantity of information, coupled with the scope and density of communications interconnectedness, has greatly accelerated cultural change in America.

One sign of the times is that attitudes about what constitutes appropriate language have shifted noticeably. Certain anatomical references, body-emissions references, and “F-bombs” used to be considered rude, crude, and unfit for professional or public discourse. But now—not so much. It’s harder and harder to find settings where this sort of talk isn’t routine.

So what’s a Christian to do? The answer to this is less simple than many think—and also more simple than many think. I hope these observations may be of some help.

1. It’s somewhat mysterious what actually makes bad words “bad.”

Isn’t it curious that English offers something like a dozen terms for a person’s rear end, but only one of them made the list of words that *used to be* banned (at least as late as 1972, but probably until the 90’s) on American broadcast TV? Similarly, English offers numerous terms for feces and copulation, but only one or two have a history of being on the definitely impolite list—and the unwritten “words good Christians don’t use” list.

So, why are different terms that refer to *exactly the same thing* controversial? Teenagers have been asking this question for generations! We still don’t really have a concise, simple answer unless “Because I said so, and if you say that again I’m going to wash your mouth out with a bar of soap!” counts.

What we do know is that words have connotation as well as denotation. They carry some emotional and social-contextual baggage. If you have any kid left in you, the word “excrement” sounds vaguely humorous. “Feces” sounds medical. Other words sound—well, nasty.

But pointing out connotation only backs the question up a notch. Where does connotation come from? What we’re forced to admit, whether we like or not, is that these conventions derive from the shared sensitivities and preferences of a society and they are subject to change over time.

That being the case, some formerly not-bad words become inappropriate and some formerly-off-limits words become generally accepted.

Further, there is no list of bad words in the Bible. (If there were a list, it would be in Hebrew or Greek, and we’d have to decide what the equivalents are *in our language*, and we’d be right back where we started!)

2. A higher level of precision might help ... or not.

Many who pontificate about what words shouldn’t be said (or even voluntarily listened to) do so with a degree of sloppiness that makes it hard for me to take them seriously. They lump it all together as “cussing” or “swearing.” This is fine until you want to think through or communicate *why* an expression should be avoided or accepted.

Here’s a short list of different kinds of controversial language, noting where the controversy tends to arise. These aren’t dictionary definitions (the dictionaries are no longer very precise on this subject either) but at least have some historical validity and, hopefully, some utility for clear thinking.

- Scatology – words having to do mostly with excrement and related topics people tend to find disgusting
- Obscenity – language considered offensive or immoral, usually having mostly to do with human sexual behavior
- Cursing – pronouncing a wish of evil on someone or something (often including profanity)
- Profanity – irreverent references to the sacred; often takes the form of insincere invocation of a deity (closely related to blasphemy, the latter tending to be more obviously intentional)
- Swearing – a promise or oath in the name of something sacred, controversial when casual or insincere, often crossing over into profanity

In conversations with my children and students, I’ve tried to help them consider the values of kindness and respect toward others, reverence toward the sacred, and honor and integrity in making and keeping promises. As the list above shows, these values relate directly to the kind of language we choose to use.

3. Scripture calls us to aim high in the language we use.

As a kid, it always used to annoy me when a pulpiter would address some popular amusement by saying “Don’ ask what’s *wrong* with it; ask what’s *right* with it!” It’s still rhetoric I would avoid, but there’s a kernel of truth there. Some evangelicals seem to always want to be on the cutting edge of acceptable language. It’s as if the goal is to be low as possible without being *too* low.

But this isn’t a biblical attitude. The teaching of Scripture on this is so widespread and familiar, it’s hard to see why there is any confusion. This is the “more simple than many think” part.

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. (Pr 25:11)

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. (Eph 4:29)

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. (Eph 5:3–4)

I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, (Mt 12:36)

Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil. (Mt 5:37)

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col 4:6)

so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, (Php 1:10)

4. There’s not much to gain from using “edgy” language.

The Bible does use strong language at times, and some may see these as examples that justify the use of *inappropriate* language. But this is hasty. The cases of strong language we find in Scripture are not the same thing as indulging in popular vulgarities in our culture. What we do find is that the Bible occasionally uses language that is ...

- intentionally disturbing (e.g., [Nah. 3:5](#), [Isa. 30:22 NIV](#), [Mal. 2:3](#), [Ezek. 4:12](#), [Ezek. 23:20 NIV](#))
- anatomically and physiologically frank (e.g., [1 Sam 25:22 KJV](#), [Gen. 38:9](#), [Deut. 25:11](#), [Exod. 4:25](#))
- poetically frank, if it can even be called frankness (e.g., [Song 7:8](#), [Prov. 5:19](#))

Scripture gives us no reason to think that we’re more effective in evangelism and discipleship if we try to use edgy, “gritty,” or “earthy” language. Who is really impressed by that? Not sinners whom the Father is drawing to faith ([John 6:44](#)), and certainly not saints “born again to a living hope” ([1 Pet 1:3](#)).

“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God” ([Rom. 10:17](#)), not by our clever attempts at cultural relevance.

Over time, language Christians once rejected as not befitting saints may well become suitable for general use. But while these cultural shifts are in progress (or perhaps regress), our privilege is to shine as lights ([Phil. 2:15](#)) by using language that is above reproach ([1 Pet. 2:12](#)).