

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of the word, the deed, and the spirit, we thank you we can be one community in this time of celebration and renewal. Let the time we partake in together fortify us for the tasks ahead. Let the meal we share together energize us for your work ahead. Let our prayers bring us closer to you and your plan of love and grace for a world in need. Let our hearts and minds be joined to our tasks of joyfulness in a world in despair.

Sometimes, Gracious God, we let our words become toxic. We do not know why, but we curse your creation, we feel ourselves feeling better when we bring others down, but we are just bringing ourselves and them down when we do such things. Help us to master our speech into loving speech that builds each other up and that does not pick out the smallest error in our preferences and manners. Lead us to be faithful representatives of the Gospel that respect authenticity and the searching spirit over what we think is perfect conduct at all times. Help us to keep the issues in perspective, O God of faithful focus, toward the mission that the Reign of God may come upon the earth fully, a reign that focus upon love above all. We pray all these things in the name of the one who put life into proper focus, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

As I've grown in my calling as a young clergy person, I've had many different ideas about what to do in the church. One idea I had was to hold a church yard sale and give it a provocative name to bring interested people in. I decided the best name for a church yard sale would be "Holy Crap," purely as a joke. I mentioned this once to some church people, and one person responded, "Oh, no! You shouldn't do that...that's a really bad word." What was meant to be a joke became something that people thought was negative from the

outset. I thought about that response and realized that we all have our different definitions about what is bad language, what is wholesome and negative speech.

When I was a young boy in Nebraska, my grandmother used to reference something she called “Farmer’s Language.” I’m sure you know what I mean. It included many four-letter words that came out when anything didn’t go my grandfather’s way. Let’s be honest, pretty much all of us have used Farmer’s Language. Ya know, you stub your toe, you bump your arm, or you just can’t get that project you’re working on to work the way you want, and you release that Farmer’s Language in a moment of frustration. For a second, it makes you feel better, but then some have this moment of guilt when they think they have sinned, and they think this is said right in scripture.

Sometimes, we confuse what the bible says with what we think God wants for us. Perhaps the two are not the same. I think that all too often, we equivocate what our culture calls negative speech with what the bible says for all time. Perhaps what we think as unwholesome may not be a sin by the definitions of scripture. What exactly is a sin, and what’s just bad manners? Let’s explore these ideas together as we see what scripture calls cursing in Philippians and James, putting these passages into perspective, and understanding what the real sin is and how to counteract it.

There are many references to speech to the bible, including what is wholesome and not wholesome. Right away, we want to put Farmer’s Language into that category, but I don’t think the bible says that when we look at the scripture on its own terms. When we look at the first example in scripture, we may be very surprised what we find. In Philippians, the Apostle Paul is naming what he gives up in order to be seen as faithful in the eyes of Christ. All of these marks of faithful Judaism are seen as signs of honor in the

eyes of his religious world, but Paul rejects them as nothing more than rubbish in the example of Jesus Christ, who worked against the world's ways. It's most interesting what language is used to describe these marks of honor in the eyes of the world. He is not saying rubbish; in fact, that's far too G-rated for his point. He's saying something much more...pointed. According to the article "Cussing Christians," by Kurt Willems, the word for "rubbish" in this passage is the Greek word "skubalon," which is used only in this instance in scripture. Just in case any of you don't know Greek fluently, I just said a very bad word. The word "skubalon" is a first-century swearing word. I'm sure you can figure out the 21st Century equivalent when we are thinking of rubbish, garbage, waste. Think about it...the Apostle Paul, whom we look to as one of the best examples of faithfulness in scripture, uses a contemporary bad word to make his point about this new life in Christ! It's rather revolutionary. We may not be able to see it clearly in the English, but Paul is working hard to emphasize how little these former marks of honor mean to a life faithful to the Gospel. Just as important, he may be using language and concepts that aren't about his way of speaking but ones that help his audience relate to his point. Scripture, here, uses a strong word to make the incredible point that what the world values is not what Christ values.

Cursing, then, can put it all into perspective. Christian author Tony Campolo used a rather provocative quote when he discussed what really matters to God. He said, "I have three things I'd like to say today. First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give an s-word. What's worse is that you're more upset with the fact that I said the s-word than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night." Is this quote offensive when it comes to what we consider proper decorum and good manners? Definitely. Does it hit a point that we should take in

deeply? Indeed. Could he have made the point without swearing? Perhaps not. Does he preach the gospel a unique way? Undeniably. Sometimes we unknowingly craft a God that cares much more about what we are offended by than what falls according to God's way. Tony Campolo brings God's way to our attention in a very shocking but effective way. In the same way, Paul uses this highly provocative language to get the attention of his audience. Christ is a ground-shaking figure, and those who preach the gospel sometimes need to shock the hearers to get the true message across.

On the other hand, we have the passage from James. James' letter is one of the greatest letters in the bible, in my opinion. James emphasizes it's not just about what we think; it's about what we do. Faith is an active concept. And he bears down on the difficulty of the tongue. "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison," he says. What we say contaminates who we are and our entire world. We can do a lot of damage with what we say, says James. But it's not simply what we say; it is who we say these things to. This is his main point, which comes with the next line of scripture. "With (the tongue) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My friends, this not ought to be so." From the same mouth come blessing and cursing, but the cursing has an object. The object are those who are made in the likeness of God. And that, friends, is everybody.

It may be offensive to hear an offhand swear word, but that's not necessarily sinful. When I hear the words of James, I hear more of the kind of cursing that is most sinful: the kind that brings down our brothers and sisters, who are all made in the image of God. The problem is that such cursing spreads through several layers, to which it curses much more than someone you don't like. As Jesus said, the first commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength." He said, "The second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself." When we curse our neighbor, we curse the image in which they were made, which is the same image we were made. When we curse them, we consider ourselves to be of the same value. We then curse their Creator. When we curse our neighbor, we commit sin, for we reflexively curse God's creation and the Great Creator.

The other day, I was listening to an interview on the show "On Being" with Lutheran preacher Nadia Boltz-Weber. She is a quite unique individual who leads a church called "House For All Sinners and Saints" in Denver. I've met her and have been impressed with the level of openness and authenticity she shows. As a part of this interview, she told the audience about how we need to love our neighbors and enemies in action. "Love your neighbor," she says, indicates nothing about inner feeling, but it does say something about action. There are many people that hurt us, that have scarred us through their actions, whether intentionally or unintentionally. We just can't love them in feeling, but we can do something else. We are called not to curse them, whether to their faces or behind their backs, but to make sure that they are loved. As she said, maybe we don't do that ourselves; maybe we make sure that they are being taken care of by others. That's what the Good Samaritan did when he left the broken man at the inn. We are called to love our neighbor.

It's more than just not cursing them. Maybe, just maybe, it's harder to do that in the deed than it is to feel.

In the final analysis, this sermon is not meant to excuse the use of what we consider bad language at all times. At some times what we think as "bad words" can have their usefulness, as Paul put it. This is meant to provide a little grace with our lives. Overall, let me put it bluntly: God has many more important things to worry about than our language. It's all about perspective. God's focusing on larger issues; as God's people we need to be focused on the same things. We must continually focus on being with one mind with our Creator and the Savior, who guide us toward love toward our neighbors. It's not just about words: it's how we are using them.

Let's be honest: at one time or another, we will use Farmer's Language. As scripture has shown us, that's not always a sin; it's more of what is improper by manners. As Christians, we are called to be fully grounded and keep what is most important in our sights. As one Christian writer, Kurt Willems, put it, we should avoid using possibly offensive language in locations where it may interfere with how we hear the Gospel. But that changes with every audience. At some times, like the way that the Apostle Paul utilized dirty language, we need to drive home the point in ways that people can relate to. Paul used an image that brought his point about the gospel home, and they could fully understand it. It's really up to the listener and how they can best hear the gospel. Thanks be to God for God's Grace and guidance to be loving people, Amen and Amen.