

# Cussin' and a Swearin'

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In this morning's gospel passage Jesus address the topics of murder, anger, adultery, lust, and divorce. And he doesn't make any of these commandments any easier. This is hard stuff. So it's a legitimate question to ask why, given everything else that's going on in this text, would I want to address on swearing? And I'm glad you asked...

The best reason is that Jesus thought it worth addressing. These last verses about swearing aren't thrown in as an aside; they aren't small talk made off the record.

Presumably Jesus considered swearing worth addressing because God the Father thought swearing worth addressing in the laws given to Israel. If you didn't notice when the gospel passage was read, what Jesus is doing is commenting on the Old Testament Law. He starts out with two of the Ten Commandments, you shall not murder and you shall not commit adultery. Next he seems to move to a series of laws in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy about keeping an oath sworn to the Lord; but as we'll see, what he's really doing is commenting on the ninth commandment, "thou shalt not bear false witness," "don't lie."

So Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and God the Father on Mount Sinai thought swearing an important topic. That's one reason to preach about it.

The second reason is that thinking theologically about the words we say is wonderful, concrete practice in thinking theologically. Really, if we can't manage to think theologically about our words, what hope do we have to think theologically about our angers or desires.

Before going any further, let's get a handle on what words exactly we're talking about here. Swearing is often used broadly to describe several related ways of talking. Certainly there's the third of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain." "In vain" refers to any use that is false, trifling, or silly. If you don't really want God involved in the situation, don't use the name. For example, were one to flush the toilet and discover an unexpected, rapidly rising plumbing problem, Jesus Christ is not an appropriate person to call in that moment. That's a great time to call a plumber, not the Lord of heaven and earth who died on your behalf.

Then there are oaths, a solemn promise to do something. Laws about such oaths are Jesus' starting place here in our passage. He expands the law to exclude any oaths made by God, by heaven, by earth, or by one's own life. For some reason trying to come up with literal examples of this always make me think of old southern people, or at least of Colonel Sanders, especially Norm Macdonald's Colonel Sanders... "I say, I say, upon my life I swear this is delicious fried chicken." There's also the still very popular "I'll be damned if..." — that's a swear on one's own life, one's eternal life actually.

But what about the swears we actually use, the swear words? Now, confession time. I've long been a proponent that, biblically and theologically, cuss words, foul language, f-bombs and monosyllabic words beginning with sh-, these are not really within the scope of what scripture is addressing. I have been known to employ such words myself, and still do sometimes, though relatively rarely. But I used to — especially before seminary — use them habitually. I've been in that place where those words are so common and so expected a part of every day discourse no one thinks twice about them.

In fact, my Christian experience in college was shaped in part by my use of a particular word. I was at a Campus Crusade ultimate frisbee game the fall of my freshman year, while I was still very much trying to make friends and figure out which groups I would be a part of. I had the frisbee, and made an absolutely awful throw, missing a very, very open team member. And as the frisbee went off course and careened into the grass, I yelled, very loudly, the word that rhymes with the term for a commercial goods carrying vehicle. And then game came to a screeching halt, not really because the frisbee was rolling out of bounds, but because everyone had stopped and stared at me, this new kid who yelled a very bad cuss word very loudly at the very Christian Campus Crusade event. That was my last Campus Crusade event. I thought, "Hurmph. Whatever. These people clearly aren't for me."

For years now I've been buoyed in my presumption that the Bible isn't really worried about cussing by the great Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, perhaps the foremost ethical thinker in the English-speaking Christian world. Stanley Hauerwas cusses like a sailor; not just in lectures, but even in church. So really, if he does it, how bad can it be?

On the other side of the greatest living Christian ethicist has been — well, the pretty consistent teaching of the church for centuries, and my wife, who has remained steadfast in her conviction that the Bible is against cussing no matter how many excellent theological and scriptural arguments I have made to the contrary. And as I've spent some time studying what Jesus is really saying here, I found that the distinction I wanted to make between "swearing" as making oaths, and "swearing"

as using cuss words, probably doesn't entirely hold. As much as I hate losing decade old marital arguments, Stephanie is right — at least partly right.

And I say partly right because there are different ways we use these words, and not all of them are equally sinful. For one, these words have a literal meaning. If you're walking through a pasture, and you advise your friend to watch out for that pile of horse manure in front of him — good for you. But should you call it horse shomething-else, no biggie. Jesus prefers 'manure,' but it's ok. And bull manure just isn't really a thing; sometimes you have to call that stuff exactly what it is.

Then there is the use of these words as interjections or explanations, our initial vocal response to something unexpectedly unpleasant. Like breaking a bone, catching a remote control thrown by a toddler with your forehead, getting in a car accident. Growing up my mother cursed rarely, but with regularity. Every time she dropped a can of food on her toe while trying to get it out of the lazy suzan (and I realize that sounds like a very specific edge case, but it happened a lot), she would loud-whisper the s-h word. I am confident this is pretty far down the list of things she and St. Peter will have discuss at the gates.

And honestly, I don't think the problem is even that these words are simultaneously vulgar and viciously totalizing. To call someone "a piece of shomething" or to tell a family member to "Get the f-our letter word out" is horrible; but there the sin lies not in the use of the words, but the anger and meanness that gave birth to them.

No, where swear words can fall under Jesus' teaching here, where they can problematic, sinful, and harmful to our souls, is in their use as conversational trump cards. This is where these words function as adjectives or adverbs, and where the purpose is to intensify what we are saying.

To go back to the earlier example, though it's a bit silly, the oath "I swear upon my life this is delicious fried chicken" is literally what Jesus said not to do. It is also semantically equivalent to "this fried chicken if f-ing delicious." They mean the same thing. Jesus quite explicitly condemns the former; the same logic condemns the latter. This is "swearing by the earth" in the language Jesus uses from the gospel.

Such uses of these words probably a lot of cussing, much of it the sort we don't consider a big deal. But, perhaps spiritually at least, it's a bigger deal than we realize.

Now I recognize that many of you are unconvinced, or at least not planning on doing anything about it. I might be able to make you laugh about it in church on Sunday, but when something goes wrong at work tomorrow those words are going

to come out like water out of a firehose. But look, even if that's you, even if you're just ready to roll your eyes, stay with me for a few more minutes.

Let us practice thinking theologically about things we usually do unthinkingly. Let's look at four particulars about cussin' and swearin' as a sin (or if you're not sure, as a potential sin).

First, as a sin, swearing just doesn't afford all that much pleasure. Think about the other sorts of sins that lead people's souls astray - lust, abuse of alcohol, excessive consumption of food, pride, pursuit of money — those sins are, by comparison, much more fun. Most of the time, adding an oath or a cuss word to a sentence doesn't make saying it that much more fun.

Sure, there are exceptions. When you're still young but too old to be punished, cussing in front of your mother can be enjoyable in a certain way. You may have your own examples. But whatever very modest pleasure is possible in swearing, it's over immediately. It doesn't leave any sweet aftertaste; no one lingers upon a fond memory of that time he cussed really well.

So, for the most part, swearing affords little pleasure, and whatever little pleasure there is is gone as soon as the word is spoken. Such are the devil's favorite sort of sins. In one of his most brilliant passages in the Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis writes of how the evil one would much prefer us sin without pleasure, "to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why."

Most of the time most people don't even swear on purpose; we know not the what or why, and don't even enjoy it.

The second particularity about cussing and swearing is that it's easy to repeat. The great 18th century preacher George Whitfield had a brilliant line about this: "Alas. The profane swearer is ready for another oath, almost before the sound of the first is out of our ears; yea, some double and treble them in one sentence, so as to confound the sense of what they say, by a horrid din of blasphemy!"

I've met that guy, you probably have too; the person whose language is so laced with profanity that you've got to filter all that out and try to figure out if the words leftover actually amount to a coherent thought.

This happens because swearing is easy; Whitfield says two or three, I say try hard enough and you can stick five or six of these words into a single sentence. And because it's so easy to do, and so fleeting, it's easy to repeat. And when it's easy to repeat, it's easy to fall into a habit, to just make it part of every day conversation. Habit is the most common reason we continually do something; it's also the most common reason we give to justify what we shouldn't do.

But the good thing about habits is that we know exactly how to unlearn them, or rather to learn new ones. There have been a lot of studies and self-help books written recently about the power of habits, and about how to modify them. I'll just reference this work from the 4th century, by the great preacher John Chrysostom — who, by the way, if you think I'm giving you hard time about foul language, well, I'm like a Care Bear compared to this guy. He wrote, in regards to breaking the habit of swearing, "If you will set over yourself many to watch you at home, such as your servant, your wife, your friends, you will easily break off from bad habits, being hard pressed and closely restrained by all. If you succeed in doing this for just 10 days...you will be rooted anew."

Now, at this point, you may think: fine, swearing isn't that much fun, and it's certainly easy to repeat — but I still just don't think it's a sin. The final two particulars address this.

So, the third particular about swearing: it makes a bad impression of the faith when Christians lace their talk with foul language. Regardless of how you personally feel about such language, these words are still restricted culturally. You can't say them on TV; we don't want our children to hear them; we expect grandma's to be shocked by them; no Disney princess will ever utter one of them.

Even if, like Stanley Hauerwas or Fr. Andrew or several years ago, you legitimately believe that the Bible doesn't have anything to say about cussing, you will not get the chance to explain that to everyone you come in contact with before they start hearing you talk.

If people know we are Christian, and then hear us swearing — whether it be making oaths we don't really mean, using "Oh my God" or "Jesus Christ" vainly, or simply making it rain f-bombs, we make it pretty obvious that faith doesn't have much of an impact on our language. Maybe not everyone, but some will legitimately ask, "If her faith doesn't impact her language, what does it have an impact on? Does it matter at all?"

Chrysostom, wisely and with a lot of Biblical support, considered the reining in of our language as a jumping off point for the development of other virtues.

Finally, the fourth particular: swearing is false; it makes liars of us. Jesus summarizes his teaching on the subject with his famous line, "Let your word be 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no.'" Can't you hear the 9th commandment here? Just don't lie, and you won't need to swear.

The heart of the matter is this: the use of swears — the oath kind or the cussing kind — is an acknowledgement that our yeses don't always mean yes and our nos

don't always mean no. We were always honest, we'd never need to swear that we really are being honest this time, right?

Think about an example of swearing on your own head. You're at the dog park with your dog, a lab. An older gentleman comes up to you and says, "I'll be damned if that isn't the prettiest chocolate lab I've ever seen."

Before saying, "Thank you" for the compliment, let's think about this a minute. Either he's serious, staking the damnation of his eternal soul to the aesthetic appearance of a hunting dog (which is stupid) or he's saying something he doesn't mean ('I'll be damned') in order to express how much he really means something else. Think about that logically for a second — why would we say something we don't mean to express how much we really mean something. That's stupid.

This is true when we use cuss words too. The difference between having "an awesome time" and a "a f-ing awesome time" is that in the latter cause you actually do really mean you had an awesome time.

Most of the time we use cuss words as a way of affirming that we really do mean what we are saying — which implicitly acknowledges that we don't always mean what we say. Or, the way it is phrased more usually, that we often say things we don't really mean. Or, the way Jesus phrased it, our 'Yes' isn't always 'yes,' our 'No' isn't always 'No.'

Anything more than 'yes yes' and 'no no' comes from "the evil one," Jesus says. "F-yes" and "F-no" — these are obviously more than "yes" and "no." Having to say that, or saying "Really yes" and "Really no", or "I swear yes" and "I swear no" — these are the devil's ideas, not God's. It's the devil's idea for us to make "yes" mean "not yes" unless we add swear word to it.

Cussing and swearing are structures of a language spoken by a people for whom honesty is problem, a spiritual problem, a problem from the devil, a problem of sin. The problem with swearing isn't that the words themselves are "bad," the words are just words. The problem is that their use creates a space in our language, and so in our thoughts and hearts, for us to speak falsely.

Let us speak honestly friends, which means let us step back from the cussin' and swearin'. Adding color to our language isn't worth the risk of blackening our hearts.