

“Hallowed Be Your Name.”

While in the doctor’s waiting room, I could hear several children playing noisily, but I could not see them. Above all the others, the child who had the deepest and loudest voice could be heard punctuating most every utterance with “Oh my God!” After a while the children came in view. I was appalled to learn that those words were being yelled out by a little girl with curly blond hair who was still in training pants.

As shocking as the child’s use of God’s name was, I knew she must have only been innocently using the language heard in her home. The disrespect of her parents for the holiness of God must be deplorable; however, it is possible that the parents are church-going persons. Even people who profess faith in God use his name vainly as a meaningless punctuation of their speech and an injected by-word.

Would I be too presumptuous in suggesting that the girl was imitating the language of the mother more than the father. Judging from the very common usage of the expression “oh my God” on television nowadays, it seems to be a favorite expression of women. That is especially disappointing because, traditionally, women have been more spiritually sensitive than men. It seems to be a part of the new image of the female to use the coarse and macho language that has been associated with blustering males in the past.

If you use that expression which I even shrink from repeating in print (Call me self-righteous!), you may be protesting in thought that you do not mean anything by its use. It is just a meaningless punctuation of your speech. There! You identified the sin which that of using God’s name in vain.

The third or the Ten Commandments is “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Exo. 20:7). *Vain* means *meaningless, empty, worthless*. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name..” (Matt. 6:9). *Hallowed* means *holy*. That which is holy is set apart or sanctified in opposition to being common or vulgar. God’s *holy* name is cannot be used as a *common* word by those who reverence him.

Profanity is not just cursing. To profane is to treat something sacred with abuse, irreverence, or contempt. That includes deity. “Holy and awesome is his name!” (Psa. 111:9). We hear God referred to as “the Man upstairs,” “Somebody up there,” and “the Big Guy” even by believers. Would you dare to address your prayer to either of those designations?

We will observe here that it is not just some word or spelling in our language that is holy. It is Deity who is holy. It is the impudence of the creature in referring to his Creator with such contempt that is reprehensible. In speaking of our inconsistent use of the tongue, James shames, “With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessings and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh” (James 3:9f). The person who has a healthy awe for God does not have a mouth like the kitchen faucet giving forth two kinds of speech.

When a person expresses surprise, shock, or any other emotion with the pretentious outcry of “Oh, my God,” it is also a profaning of prayer and our approach to God. In a somewhat similar manner, when a person asks God to damn someone, it is a request, a prayer to God showing the greatest contempt for a fellow human being. To say you do not really mean a curse as a prayer does not excuse it or absolve your irreverence and contempt.

The ancient Jews considered the personal name attributed to the Creator too holy to be uttered. In the Hebrew language it was YHVH or JHVH. The Hebrew had no vowels, but English translators later added vowels making it Jehovah. Instead of pronouncing the sacred name, the Jews called it the “Four Letters”, which in Greek was the “Tetragrammaton.” Such respect came not from a command but from their awe and reverence. Although such a formal restriction is not placed upon us, a healthy sense of awe is essential to our relationship with God.

Why Use Shocking Speech?

Why is profanity of speech so commonly used? In verbal outbursts, exclamations, and bold assertions, why do people call upon words and expressions which relate to religion and the holiest of Beings and things? Without any psychological expertise, we can detect some reasons, none of which justify the profanity.

Insecure teenagers want to prove their macho qualities, their daring nature, and their rebellion by shocking speech and actions. Most of them find it easier to gain this attention by swaggering speech than by their actions. So they try to out-do each other in profane and vulgar speech -- unless they are intelligent enough to be confident of their own self-image or have religious training that instills reverence.

Many persons never mature enough to cease such aggressive adolescent self-image building. It becomes such a psychological crutch that they feel an inability to express themselves in meaningful language, so they punctuate it with shocking profanity and vulgarity. They continue to feel socially insecure with their peers who use blustering speech so that, without that bold speech, they are afraid of being disdained as a nerd. And after long practice, they lose all sense of the distasteful nature of their contemptuous and irreverent language.

What is classified as vulgarity may differ in different generations and cultures. Are those shocking terms relating to the human body and its functions inappropriate? To ask that question is almost to answer it. First, “Let your speech always be gracious...” (Col. 4:6). If we must shock, we should do it like Jesus did – with challenging ideas and exposure of hypocrisy instead of vulgarity which adds nothing positive. Second, vulgar language degrades the image of mankind and is contemptuous of his qualities that make him higher than a beast.

Surely, I am not going to be picky about the common usage of *hell*, you may be thinking. Yes, I am! Why use the word so recklessly and with such abandon? Its use is intended to indicate that the speaker is not afraid of hell. He can toss the thought of hell as a by-word, showing a disdain for its awesome meaning. And I suspect that few have any real concern about hell any more for hell is mentioned more in jokes than in awe.

In similar manner, the use of *damn*, even as an adjective describing an inanimate object, is an expression of disdain of the most horrible truth that the mind can conceive – the reality of meeting eternal retribution for our sins. To use the word in disdain to apply

to a human being is to show utter contempt for the person. That is the opposite of the attitude of a true disciple who is identified by his love.

We are to judge our speech, not altogether by the specific words we use, but by the attitude they express. In my youth when my associates were much more respectful in their choice of language, many euphemisms for “curse words” were common. Only a nerd would use such inane expressions today! Are euphemisms (sound-like words) inappropriate? Why do you ask? Why do you wish to use those terms? If they express the attitude of contempt or cursing usually expressed in stronger, more shocking language, then who could defend their use? Do you wish to sound like you are cursing when you are not?

Though the name of God may not be involved, the curse which questions the parentage of a person is designed to express contempt which is not a fruit of the Spirit. Jesus condemned the addressing of a person with “*Raca*,” an Aramaic term of contempt, or with “You fool!”, not because those are forbidden words but because they were used to express a wrong attitude.

If his name (being) is not hallowed in your conversation, how can you then pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name”?

All right, I am just preaching to the choir; the people who need this lesson don’t read this mailout, you may be saying. I would like to think so, but discordant notes are heard from the best of choirs! []