

The Real Problem with 4-Letter Words

JANUARY 4, 2021 | KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR



I think a lot about cursing. I suspect we all do.

Even if we refrain from it, cursing is all around us. Elected officials -- both [Republican](#) and [Democrat](#) -- have made recent headlines for swearing on the job and in the public eye. President Trump frequently used colorful language at his rallies, including, reportedly, an [obscenity](#) to describe the beliefs of some of his religious supporters. Joe Biden's [vocabulary](#) could make a sailor blush.

Both [Reformed](#) and [progressive](#) pastors have exploited the power of shock effect by placing carefully planned obscenities into their speeches, while another Christian celebrity [slyly hinted](#) at it.

Social-media feeds, movies, and cable programming are littered with [once forbidden](#) words. The seven words George Carlin famously said couldn't be spoken on television are now, [according to one accounting](#), posted 22 times a second

on Twitter. One can hardly be in an airport or department store without overhearing someone on a cell phone casually dropping f-bombs.

“The power of a curse word is not in the letters, but in the context, intention, and effect.”

Because words (good ones and bad) are the currency of my trade as an English professor, I’ve had to consider cursing from theoretical and practical perspectives as I’ve sought to help my students (and myself) think well about the curse words we encounter in literature, art, and life.

Ultimately, the way curse words function magnifies the way all words function: the power is not in the letters, but in the context, intention, and effect.

Three Kinds of Cursing

Cursing falls into different categories. Strictly speaking, *profanities* are words that [desacralize what is holy](#). Words misusing the names of God and his judgments are profane; the worst of these are blasphemy.

While profanities are related to the divine, *obscenities* are related to the human. This category of words serves to coarsen bodily functions (whether sexual or excretory).

Both categories are filled with a range of terms that vary in social acceptability, from the mild euphemisms we use with kids at the toilet to the harshest clusters of consonants whose very sounds degrade intimate acts. It’s natural to find the ugliest-sounding words most offensive. But a Christian ought to consider that even the gentlest euphemisms for taking the Lord’s name in vain should give greater offense than the coarsest sexual term.

“The gentlest euphemisms for taking the Lord’s name in vain should give greater offense than the coarsest sexual term.”

Another category of curse words consists of those the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker calls “[abusive](#).” These include *derogatory epithets* inflicted on a class of people. These terms aren’t generally classified as swear words, but their effect in being offensive is the same.

As with all curse words, acceptability of these terms can change over time. It’s common for these evolutions to be dismissed as mere “political correctness.” But when neutral words are weaponized long enough, they can become offensive in the same way any swear word does. They truly become curses, and the Christian should not utter them. Indeed, insulting others by using terms they find hurtful is a kind of profanity because it is an offense to those made in God’s image.

In her fascinating [history of swearing](#), Melissa Mohr shows how the words considered taboo in a culture reflect what that culture values. Swear words related to body parts and functions (obscenity) are, not surprisingly, less taboo in cultures with less personal privacy. Likewise, highly religious cultures have more taboo words in the category of profanity. As religious belief wanes (and along with this, the taboos against profanities), we can expect abusive epithets (used to demean people) to grow as a category of socially unacceptable words. Christians should refrain from offending both God and neighbor with our speech.

Why We Curse

Even the virtuous among us have not likely avoided cursing completely. Research even shows that people [associate cursing with honesty](#). Of course, people swear for lesser

reasons, too. Sometimes Christians can [use swearing](#) as a way to seem “cool” or in a shallow attempt to try to appeal to unbelievers.

Cognitive science has [shown](#) that swearing is associated with a different part of the brain than other language and can be a reaction similar to the kinds of instinctive responses animals give when distressed. This helps explain why involuntary swearing can occur with certain cognitive impairments.

Research has also shown that swearing can actually [lessen physical pain](#), which is why it can be so easily triggered involuntarily by sudden pain or fear. Yet overusing taboo words [diminishes that effect](#). In other words, the more we swear, the less “effective” it is.

Heart of the Matter

At times, Scripture itself includes the apt (and rare) use of harsh words. The word *dung*, for example, appears more than 40 times in the King James Version. And, in [Philippians 3:8](#), Paul describes the joy of his salvation using a term which in the original Greek is far coarser than what appears in most English translations.

We may recoil from such “earthy” language, but we should beware of taking our cues more from Victorianism’s sense of propriety than from the Bible itself. It’s also more Victorian than biblical to think hearing or reading curse words is sinful in itself. Certainly, if hearing swearing in a movie is a stumbling block (and I have friends for whom it is), then it should be avoided. But, in general, exposure is not endorsement and need not be considered as such.

And there’s a real danger in focusing so much on how many letters are in a word that comes out of our mouths (or passes through our ears) that we neglect the most serious matter: our hearts.

“There’s a real danger in focusing so much on how many letters are in a word that we neglect the most serious matter: our hearts.”

The Bible instructs believers to avoid using coarse language (e.g., [Eph. 4:29; 5:4](#); [Col. 3:8-10](#)), but it is not only -- or most significantly -- through words that we profane the sacred or render obscene what God has created good. Writing to the people of God, the prophet Amos repeatedly affirmed that actions -- not only words -- profane the Lord’s name.

It is, after all, sin that is the real curse.



Karen Swallow Prior is research professor of English and Christianity and culture at South-eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Her most recent book is [On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life in Great Books](#).

Original location for this article:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/problem-4-letter-words/>