

Can Christians Swear?

As I read *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle, this question crossed my mind. Scattered throughout Boyle's inspiring narrative of his more than 20 years of working with gangs in Los Angeles were numerous instances of explicit language. Some of these were quotes from current or former gang members, and others were from Father Boyle himself.

If the context of "swear words" serves to build up the church, are the words themselves "wrong"?

In *Tattoos on the Heart*, there were numerous instances where Father Boyle used profanity when revealing profound, personal truths about who people are or when challenging them to see how ridiculous gang life is. Explicit language was used both to build people up and to correct and redirect. Does it matter how the words are interpreted by the listener, or is explicit language disqualified from Christian vocabulary regardless of setting?

As a Young Life leader, I constantly find myself entering a foreign culture—high school. Most of these kids are not like me. They don't think like me. They don't believe what I believe. They don't talk like me. If I'm not well versed in "kid-culture," it creates a disconnect between us, and that disconnect can add to the conception that the gospel isn't for them—they aren't interested in being like me. Obviously there is a different dynamic in effect in this relationship (I'm an adult and they're kids), but Christians spread a gospel that was written for the whole world—every culture, every person, every language (Mark 16:15, Matt. 24:14, Ps. 96:3, Rev. 14:6–7, Matt. 28:19–20). How do we reconcile that with what social science teaches about how vernacular, dialects and cultural context shape our interpretation of language? Are swear words always inappropriate, "unwholesome," "corrupting" and therefore sinful (Eph. 4:29)?

As we bring the gospel to youth, gangs and other cultural contexts where swearing is not only acceptable, but a major component of the vocabulary, is it acceptable for Christians? Can “swear words” be part of a conversation that points someone to Jesus or helps someone understand how much they are loved by God?

So what does the Bible say?

Both testaments of the Bible have numerous verses addressing the language we use—Ephesians 4:29, 5:4; 1 Peter 3:10; James 3:9–12, 5:12; Luke 6:45, Colossians 3:8; 2 Timothy 2:16. Matthew 5:37, 12:36–37; Exodus 20:7. Psalm 10:7; Proverbs 10:32.

A handful of other verses are often brought into the conversation as well, but if the central issue is whether or not particular words are inherently sinful, these appear to be the most applicable.

Frequently, when people say that the Bible clearly addresses swearing and cursing, we run into contextual issues. The verses that are “most clear” are actually least relevant to the conversation.

Cursing People

James 3:9–10 talks about “cursing people.” Although swear words can definitely be used that way, they are used in other ways as well. In the same way, countless words we would consider innocent in themselves can be strung together into the worst of curses. How often does cursing someone start with “I wish [person’s name] ...”? Probably more than we’d care to admit.

Swearing

James 5:12 clearly says, “do not swear.” Here though, swearing is tied to promising, or establishing an oath. This verse is

more relevant to a conversation about swearing on the Bible in court than one about the sinfulness of individual words. If anything, it's more condemning of the phrase, "I swear on ..."

Outbursts of Anger

If you hit your thumb with a hammer, or someone cuts you off in traffic, how do you instinctively react? These are cliché situations where profanity may leave someone's lips. Again though, are the words the issue? When a buildup of frustration prompts you to say something out of anger, I'm not sure it matters what those words are—your attitude makes it sinful. Psalm 37:8–9, Proverbs 14:17, 16:32, 15:18, 19:11, 22:24, 25:28; Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8, James 1:19–20, 4:11–12, Matthew 5:22, and numerous other verses address the danger and consequences of anger.

Whatever you conclude about the sinfulness of specific words, it's important to remember that not using swear words doesn't excuse the way you use the rest of the English (or any other) language. Your words can still be considered "corrupting talk" (Eph. 4:29); "filthiness", "foolish talk" or "crude joking" (Eph. 5:4); "evil" or "speaking deceit" (1 Pet. 3:10); "cursing" (James 3:10, Ps. 10:7); "slander" or "obscene talk" (Col. 3:8); "irreverent babble" (2 Tim. 2:16); "careless words" (Matt. 12:36); and yes, even "swearing" (James 5:12, Matt. 5:37).

When you have something to say, what you say, how you say it, when you say it and where you say it can all shape how your words are received by the listener—and ultimately God (Matt. 12:36–37). {eoa}

Ryan Nelson is a volunteer leader for Young Life and a blogger for Faithlife, where this article first appeared. Faithlife uses technology to equip the Church to grow in the light of the Bible, offering 14 products and services for churches including Faithlife Proclaim and Logos Bible Software.