

Watch Your Mouth!

Real men don't use bad language.

If you watch enough television and movies, or listen to enough popular music, you'll eventually get the message that real men talk like old sailors. Words once considered taboo in public have now become part of our nation's lexicon.

In his book *Cursing in America*, Timothy Jay says 13 percent of the leisure conversation of American adults contains cursing. As Christian men, we're supposed to adhere to a higher standard than the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the talk doesn't always match the walk.

If we're not careful, we too can become infected by the insidious acceptability of vulgarity in everyday life by a desensitized culture.

Domino Effect

According to a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) in Washington, D.C., vulgarity has moved from language associated primarily with hostility to casual banter.

"For all that critics complain about the sex and violence, foul language is where the action is in the popular culture's ongoing descent toward the lowest common denominator," the CMPA study concluded.

In the movies, highly paid stars spouting four-letter words break down barriers in the minds of the public. But the change is most apparent on television, where characters could not utter the words toilet and pregnant in the 1950s.

"Every time I say it can't get worse, it does," says L. Brent Bozell III, chairman of the Parents Television Council in Los Angeles (PTC). "It's like an itch that can't be scratched enough, forever pushed to the next level."

Motion pictures are responsible for a domino effect in other media, Bozell says. Words and situations prohibited on television less than a decade ago are said with increasing frequency.

"When a wall is broken in the movie theaters, you can count on someone wanting to break that wall in television soon thereafter, first on premium channels, then cable, then broadcast TV," Bozell says.

Part of the problem, according to Robert W. Peters, president of Morality in Media, is the double standards that exist between television and real life.

In real life, children are reprimanded for swearing by parents, teachers and church workers. Adults are corrected by spouses and co-workers. "Yet you never see stars embarrassed for swearing in a sitcom," Peters says. "It's always 'funny.'"

PTC has conducted several studies, determining that foul language is more than five times as frequent on television as a decade earlier because of graphic sexual content references on topics such as masturbation, oral sex and genitalia.

The music industry has changed in the last decade, too. Traditionally, raunchy lyrics have appealed only to social outcasts. Yet Eminem's vulgar-laden The Marshall Mathers LP became the fastest-selling hip-hop compact disc in history, selling 11 million copies in nine months.

Many people, not just conservative Christians, see rampant swearing as part of an overall breakdown in civilization.

Some point to the anti-authority, shock-treatment culture of the late 1960s that ushered in comedians such as Lenny Bruce and George Carlin. Others point to the Monica Lewinsky scandal for making once-restricted speech part of the public domain.

John Nieder, host of the Art of Family Living radio program in Dallas, says the rise in vulgarity is symptomatic of the godlessness, abusive behavior and lack of restraint Paul predicted in 2 Timothy 3.

But the tolerance of vulgarity is a strong indicator that the body of Christ is not impacting society, Nieder says: "Ultimately we're conforming to the world. Vulgarity is degrading and destroys modesty."

Keeping It Clean

If you find yourself "slipping" from time-to-time where profanity is concerned, here's a hard truth: Spewing vulgarity could be an indication that we're not allowing the Holy Spirit to take control.

The Bible has much to say about what we allow to come out of our mouths:

In Ephesians 5:4, Paul tells Christians, "obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking" are "out of place" (NIV).

Ephesians 4:29 admonishes, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths."

In Colossians 3:8, Christians are told to rid themselves of "filthy language from your lips."

Colossians 4:6 advises, "Let your conversation be always full of grace."

In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul says, Christians are to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in

faith and in purity.”

“‘Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,’” Jesus says in Matthew 12:34.

Swearing shows a lack of patience and tolerance, according to James O’Connor, author of *Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing*. Increasingly, Americans are feeling as though they must express themselves with hostility and belligerence.

In his book, O’Connor lists 75 common expressions of the vulgar term for defecation and how ludicrous its uses are. Words with vulgar origins such as “suck,” “brownnose,” “screw” and “pissed off” have even made their way into the church.

“You can still complain, but do it in a much more polite way,” O’Connor suggests.

Changing Habits

Since swearing is a learned behavior, it can be unlearned with effort.

It comes down to attitude, according to O’Connor. “Do you want people to perceive you as rude, crude and cross or someone who is polite, mature and able not to cuss at every little irritation?”

“Swearing is a habit that comes out of laziness,” O’Connor adds. “It does influence the way people perceive your character, intelligence and maturity. To swear in public places is very abrasive and shows a lack of civility.”

John Nieder says Christians need to establish a no-tolerance policy for using bad language. It’s like people who claim that dabbling in soft-core pornography won’t lead to hard-core viewing, he says.

“Letting down our guard only leads to worse things,” he explains. “‘Hell’ and ‘damn’ shouldn’t be on the lips of Christians.” NM

John W. Kennedy is associate editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel* magazine.