Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Sound Doctrine; Sound Words
Scripture: Titus 2:7-8
Code: A362

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This morning I want to look at two verses in Titus 2—verses 7-8. This is an admonition from Paul to Titus, his friend, partner, protege, and true son in the faith. Titus is one of the unsung heroes of the early church—a young pastor whose faithful support and constant behind-the-scenes labor made him extremely precious to Paul. Paul writes to Titus with these instructions (Titus 2:7-8): "Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us."

I chose that text, frankly, because I'm deeply concerned about the tendency of so many pastors lately to employ profanity, crude and obscene words, vile subject matter, carnal topics, graphic sexual imagery, erotic language, and filthy jokes. Most of you, I know, are aware of the trend I'm talking about. I'm tempted to call it the pornification of the pulpit. The justification usually given is that coarse language and sexual themes are the tools of contextualization. It's a way to make us sound more relevant. Lots of voices in the church are insistent that this is absolutely essential if we want to reach certain segments of our culture.

The apostle Paul said otherwise, and that's what I want to look at in this hour.

When I was considering what subjects might be important for a group of pastors and church leaders as large and diverse as this, I couldn't get away from this issue. The *New York Times Magazine* recently did a feature article on Mark Driscoll in which this was a major theme. "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?" was the title of the article. Here's the lead sentence: "Mark Driscoll's sermons are mostly too racy to post on [an] evangelical Christian 'family friendly' . . . Web site."

So this is a subject almost everyone (including the *New York Times*) is already talking nonstop about. And yet it seems to me that people in the evangelical world are not *thinking* very biblically about it. What language and what kind of subject matter are suitable for the pulpit in a worship service? What gifts and what virtues qualify a man to be a pastor? And what should stand out most prominently when someone analyzes our style of ministry? What would YOU want the *New York Times* to focus

on if they did an article analyzing your style?

A decade ago (in our circles, at least), no one would have considered those to be very tough questions. But now evangelicals are obsessed with this issue, and frankly many are very confused about it. It amazes me how many young men in the ministry today are utterly enthralled with smutty talk and lascivious subject matter—and they insist this is a *positive* trend.

I'm also appalled at the number of good men and Christian leaders who privately say they don't really "approve" of "filthiness . . . foolish talk[, and] crude joking"; but they feel we need to overlook those trends and keep silence in public—so that the delicate fabric of evangelical unity isn't torn asunder by a controversy over words. Frankly, I think this whole issue probably would not be controversial at all if a handful of respected Christian leaders were willing to step up and deal with the matter *boldly* and biblically.

Sadly, evangelical tolerance for shenanigans in the pulpit has undergone a monumental change in the past couple of decades—and not in a healthy direction. The most overtly lewd and profane kinds of foolishness have found their way into the evangelical repertoire under the rubric of *contextualization*.

Now, I face a serious practical dilemma here. In one sense, I'd like to show you some examples of the kind of thing I'm talking about, so that you understand that I am not exaggerating. On the other hand, most of these things are so thoroughly inappropriate that there's no way I would ever drag them into our worship center.

But I'm pretty sure most of you are aware of *some* of the kinds of things I am talking about. Here's a handful of more-or-less sanitized examples: There's a group called xxxchurch who say they are targeting porn addicts and people who work in the so-called adult entertainment industry. They sponsor a booth at the major porn conventions—where they say they are doing evangelism. They hand out Bibles and wear t-shirts stenciled with a deliberately ambiguous slogan: "Jesus loves Porn stars." And the centerpiece of their display is a 15-foot inflatable phallus. They have painted a face on this abomination and given it a name. Now, xxxchurch isn't some obscure anomaly I dug up out of nowhere. You will find links to their website from literally hundreds of churches who support and promote what xxxchurch is doing.

Trends like that abound in the evangelical world. It is suddenly very popular to preach sermons in which the pastor graphically describes private acts of perversion in language borrowed from the porn industry. There's a group of young women online who blog about the intimate details of their sex lives under the guise of trying to help Christian women spice up troubled marriages.

In a group this size, it's likely that some of *you* may even have links to organizations and resources like that on your church websites. If so, *shame on you*, and you need to rethink what you are doing. Strategies like those invariably employ purposely suggestive images and speech that is calculated to be erotic. And I have no doubt whatsoever that they lure Christians into a culture of porn and carnality. I know for a fact that they are deadly stumbling blocks for people who have been saved out of that lifestyle. To claim that it's *necessary* to use deliberately seductive strategies such as those to draw people to Christ out of a culture that is already obsessed with everything erotic is a lie. It also ignores the reality of what has actually happened to the evangelical movement over the past decade.

Likewise, to claim that filthy language and purposely coarse words are essential for reaching people with the gospel is ludicrous. But that is exactly the argument that is being made. Here's a typical comment I found posted in a Southern Baptist discussion forum where this was the topic under discussion. The guy who wrote this seems to be a youth pastor or college minister. He says:

Any Christian who says the words on the FCC's "dirty word" list are bad . . . is judging (and hence pushing away) millions of the lost simply because they . . . use different syllables. . . . God gives us no list of "abusive" words . . . . In a discussion with a "sinner" in a bar, the f-word often simply means "very". I have won many people in [our community] to Christ dropping the f-bomb, and that is no lie. . . . Any word can be used abusively, and any word can be used to glorify God."

Really?

Have you ever wondered why the IRS doesn't publish tax forms in the language of the gutter? *Of course you haven't*. because no one really believes that's a necessary or legitimate form of contextualization.

Todd Friel points out that you can watch the 11:00 news on any television channel in Seattle, and you won't find them using porn-slang and gutter-talk to communicate the daily headlines to their viewers. And none of their viewers are demanding for the news to be translated into cuss words so they can understand what is being said. Why is that? If that kind of contextualization is so essential to communicate a message to people in what is supposedly "the most unchurched community" in America, why don't the secular news media know that? Could it be that talking dirty is not really as important as some stylish evangelicals are telling us it is?

This approach to "relevance" has swept the evangelical community in a very short time. Just three years ago we were discussing the pros and cons of Rick Warren's *40 days of Purpose*. Today the latest rage in the evangelical community is "40 days of sex"—or some variation on that theme. Ed Young, Jr., Pastor of the third largest church in America, got nationwide news coverage for his church because he gave a series on sex with a giant bed as a prop on the platform. He sat on that bed and announced that he was issuing a "seven-Day Sex Challenge" to the congregation.

Here's how the *Dallas Morning News* reported the story:

God may have rested on the seventh day, but the Rev. Ed Young wants married couples to have sex all week long.

Once a day. Beginning this Sunday.

The call to action will headline Mr. Young's Sunday sermon at Grapevine-based Fellowship Church. He plans to deliver his challenge while sitting on a bed.

I think Ed Young actually *got* that idea from a Florida church where the pastor issued a 30-day sex challenge. Apparently, 30 days turned out to be *too* rigorous, so most of the churches that have followed suit have down-scaled the demand a bit.

But suddenly that kind of eroticism from the pulpit is all the rage. Time magazine noticed the trend and did a major article about it six months ago, titled "And God said: Just Do It." I see a different story almost every week about some church sponsoring a series on sex or a sex challenge of some kind. Part of the trend involves putting up suggestive billboards around town. The billboards tend to outrage even secular communities, and that's one reason this trend keeps making the news. Every church seems to try to make the ads more sleazy than all their predecessors. In Kenosha, WI, just last month, the secular school board informed a church they couldn't use school property for their Sunday services anymore because the school board looked at the flyer the church put on doors all around the community—and the school board thought the flyer advertizing the pastor's series on sex was too pornographic.

Let's be honest: No one *really* thinks this kind of thing is absolutely necessary to reach our culture, and I've never heard anyone even try to argue that these trends are having a sanctifying impact in a society that is already sex-crazed to the point of gross perversion.

So why is this so pervasive? It's clear, for one thing, that there are lots of people in the evangelical movement who really want to be at home in the culture. And too many pastors are enthralled with the idea of being cool in the eyes of the world.

Let's be candid: to a very large degree the whole notion of *contextualization* has been commandeered as an excuse for carnal minds poisoned by overexposure to smut. Some people just love the sound of filthy words, and they and feed their egos with the shockwaves that kind of language generates. The more the church wants to be like the world, the more that attitude will dominate.

Now, that's a much longer introduction than I originally intended to give, but I want to stress that this problem is serious, and widespread, and it's moving through the evangelical movement with

frightening speed. As one guy said, it's not really a trend anymore; it has become the new norm.

One more thing about contextualization. (I spoke on this subject at last year's Shepherds' Conference): If your approach to contextualization is designed mainly to make you fit comfortably into a pagan culture—then you have an upside-down view of what Paul meant when he spoke of becoming all things to all men so that he might by all means win some.

And that's one of the prominent lessons of *our* text.

Look first at the larger context. Titus, the recipient of this letter, was a close companion of the apostle Paul. You can see clearly in the way Paul writes about him that he had earned Paul's trust. Titus was evidently quite a young man, because in chapter 1, verse 4, Paul addresses him as "my true *child* in a common faith." It's not "my *son* in the faith," *huios* (a legal son who has come of age, or someone who has been granted the privilege of sonship by adoption) but *teknon*—"child"—which signifies a child by birth. The choice of that word implies that Titus was still a very young man. And combined with the adjective ("my *genuine* child according to [our] common faith") it also suggests that Paul had personally led Titus to Christ.

So this young Gentile convert became indispensable to Paul. In 2 Corinthians alone, Paul refers to Titus nine times. (He also mentions him twice in Galatians and once in 1 Timothy.) Paul entrusted a number of important responsibilities to Titus. It's clear that he regarded Titus as much more than a pupil or messenger boy, but Titus was a true and trusted partner in the apostolic ministry. So when Paul moved on from Crete, he left Titus there to establish and organize the leadership in the churches that were being founded there. Paul says in chapter 1, verse 5: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you."

Now, Paul has some not-so-nice things to say about the culture of Crete. It turns out this place was even worse than Seattle. Titus 1:10-16:

For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.

11 They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

12 One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."

13 This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith,

14 not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.

15 To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

16 They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

There's a bit of cultural sensitivity for you: "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."

"Ooh, that's harsh."

Yes, it is. And if you ponder carefully what Paul is saying to Titus here, this passage explodes some of the favorite myths about contextualization. Paul does not say, *Cretans are liars and lazy gluttons, so reach out to them on that basis. Immerse yourself in their culture and learn to speak that language. Appeal to their love f food, wine, and fellowship. Organize your men's ministry so that the meetings are in the pub. Harness their passion for ultimate fighting by hanging out with gladiators and imitating their lifestyle and values. Let the flavor of that culture season all your preaching. Contextualize!* You won't find that in Paul's instructions to Titus.

Notice this, too: Paul doesn't lower the bar of Christian leadership to accommodate the hedonistic bent of Cretan Culture. In verses 6-9 He gives Titus practically the same list of qualifications for church leadership he gave in 1 Timothy 3.

Frankly, I don't envy the task Titus was called to (v. 5): "Put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town" How can you meet those standards for leaders if all you have to work with are fresh converts out of such a corrupt culture?

But Titus's task was clear. He was not to ape the fashions of that society. He was to teach them to be different. Not only that—but with regard to the young men in particular (since Titus himself was a young man)—he was to be a different kind of example from anything they had ever seen. He wasn't supposed to crawl into society's sewer and join the fraternity of Cretan bad-boys. He needed to model dignity, purity, integrity, reverence, and sound speech. That's the whole point of our text (2:7): "Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us."

Notice the flow of logic in chapter 2. These are things that adorn sound doctrine. Paul is reminding Titus of several important practical and behavioral issues that "[are in accord] with sound doctrine."

Doctrine is vital, yes. Some doctrines are *essential*, right? That's the premise of "Together for the Gospel," The Gospel Coalition, the Shepherds' Fellowship, and other similarly-minded groups. We may not agree on everything down to the smallest minutia, and we won't let insignificant disagreements rupture our fellowship. But we *must* agree on the gospel. That's the only basis for authentic Christian fellowship.

Doctrine per se is not extraneous or superfluous, despite what our postmodern friends try to tell us. *Some* truths are vital—especially the rich tapestry of truth at the heart of the gospel. *Some truths* are so vital that if you deny or try to alter them in any way, you're *anathema*—accursed. And some lies are so dangerous that as Paul says back in chapter 1, verse 11, the mouths of those who utter such lies "must be stopped."

But get this: there are likewise certain principles of sanctification and personal conduct that are so vital we're required to break fellowship with those who ignore them. First Corinthians 5:11: "I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one." In other words, if someone calls himself a Christian but his lifestyle or language is chronically incompatible with a sanctified heart and mind—certainly if he is given to casual blasphemy or obsessed with things that are lewd and indecent—Paul says, don't associate with such people.

Paul's point is that sanctified behavior is the essential companion to authentically sound doctrine. You may verbally affirm the finest confession of faith ever written, but if your words and deeds deny it, Paul would not have affirmed you as an authentic Christian at all. Much less would he lay hands on you for ministry. He says so, right there in chapter 1, verses 15-16: "To the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work." Sound doctrine is essential—but it's not enough.

Therefore, Paul says to Titus, (2:1): "as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine." Teach the principles of sanctification that adorn the doctrine you teach. And then Paul describes what that looks like (verse 2): "Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled," etc. Verse 3: "Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women . . . "

He is not giving Titus exhaustive lists of what is crucial in sanctification; these are representative samples of the *kinds* of qualities Titus needed to stress, especially in such a grunge-addicted culture as Crete. And Paul goes systematically through all the classifications of saints—every Sunday-school class—starting with the older men, then the older women, who are expressly tasked with teaching the *younger* women. Then in verse 6, Paul gets to the category to which Titus himself belonged: "younger

men."

Notice what Titus is to stress with them, and *how* he is to stress it (vv. 6-8): "Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Show yourself in all respects to be a *model* of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned." That's the heart of our text, and there you have the apostle Paul's instructions for a young man ministering to other young men in a pagan, unchurched, pleasure-oriented, idolatrous culture. There's *nothing whatsoever* here about adopting the badges of the youth culture in Crete. Not a word about the importance of fitting in or adapting your ministry to the lowbrow lifestyle of Crete. Titus was the one who was supposed to set the standard for them, not vice versa.

By the way, let me make just one more brief comment about what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 9:22, where he *does* speak of "becom[ing] all things to all people, that by all means [he] might save some." The context in 1 Corinthians 9 is just as clear as the context here, and Paul is talking about two completely different things. In 1 Corinthians 9, he was talking about avoiding adding unnecessary stumbling-blocks that get in the way of people's hearing the gospel. The gospel itself is already enough of a stumbling-block. Paul wasn't the least bit concerned about adjusting the gospel message to eliminate the offence of the gospel; or adjusting the message to suit the tastes of some subculture; or making himself seem cool and stylish. He was simply trying to keep himself out of the way as the gospel advanced. He didn't want to offend people unnecessarily over peripheral matters. His point was that he respected every culture's taboos as much as possible—*not* that he joined up with those in the culture who were challenging the taboos. He absolutely was not saying he was willing to adopt any and every aspect of a particular subculture or lifestyle in order to fit in.

In fact, *here* he more or less instructs Titus not to imitate the dominant features of the culture. Notice how the twin themes of *reverence* and *dignity* run through this whole passage. Paul doesn't suggest that we can tolerate a lack of dignity or a greater measure of irreverence from young men, just because they may not be fully mature yet. Dignity is expressly required of both young and old, Paul says.

And that was *totally* counter-culture. Remember that in chapter 1, verses 12-16, Paul basically says that the central problem with all of Cretan culture is that people were undignified, irreverent, self-indulgent slobs: "liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." He doesn't say that's a cultural reality Titus needed to indulge. He doesn't tell Titus to get creative and learn to adapt his strategy to fit Crete's youth culture.

Paul clearly *recognized* Crete's cultural tendency to favor the things of the flesh, but he was not in favor of making that tendency part of the ambience of the churches he was planting on Crete. Does anyone seriously think Paul would have approved of an inflatable Phallus as an advertizing device in a culture like Crete?

Instead, Paul says (1:13): "Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith"

Then he repeatedly stresses the importance of dignity and reverence. Chapter 2, verse 2: "Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled." Verse 3: "Older women *likewise* are to be reverent in behavior." Verses 6-7, "Likewise [to] the *younger* men. . . . Be a model of . . . dignity."

There's a lot in these two verses than time permits us to unpack. Notice that Paul encourages Titus to cultivate sound behavior, sound doctrine, and sound words—and to be a model in all those ways (*not just the doctrine*). Your life, your doctrine, and your speech are all crucial aspects of your pastoral duty.

In fact, Paul words these instructions so that those categories are interwoven. Each one is essential to the others. They aren't three totally separate things, but three aspects of the same duty. I've been reading the text from the ESV, which inserts the conjunction and between good works and sound doctrine, giving the unfortunate impression that Paul differentiates good works and good doctrine. But he doesn't. Sound doctrine is simply a prominent feature of good works. The NASB gets the gist of it as well as any: "show yourself to be an example of good deeds, *with* purity in doctrine." Keeping your doctrine pure is one of the good deeds you need to exemplify. And then Paul says your doctrine isn't really pure if you don't impart it to people in a dignified way through "sound speech that cannot be condemned."

Now, that's the specific aspect of Paul's instructions to Titus that I'm most concerned with this morning. I want to focus on what he says about our speech. I keep hearing people (including some well-known leaders in the evangelical movement) making the claim that it really doesn't matter how radically we contextualize the message as long as we basically get the theological facts and the doctrinal formulae of the message correct. I'm convinced that is patently wrong. In fact, that way of thinking goes contrary to the whole point Paul is stressing in his instructions to Titus. Your doctrine isn't really pure at all if you yourself are not an example of reverence and dignity. If your manner of speech is lewd and profane, or if your lifestyle is characterized by the same fleshly tendencies that define secular culture, then you are not a fit minister of the gospel, and you ought to step down.

Paul says that very thing at the end of Titus 1, starting in verse 15: "[Those whose] minds and . . . consciences are defiled . . . profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work."

So if you consider Paul's command about "sound speech that cannot be condemned" in its full context, he is putting a *very* high premium on the importance of dignity, reverence, purity, and soundness of language. That would apply *especially* to the language we use in the pulpit. But here's what is vital: Paul was actually commanding Titus to guard even his everyday speech so that his

whole life would be consistent with the dignity, reverence, and holiness the gospel commands. Paul was urging Titus not to do or say anything in any context that would be unbecoming to the gospel or give the enemies of the gospel a legitimate reason to speak evil about us.

Of course, throughout the New Testament we're reminded that the world will speak evil of us. Paul isn't suggesting we ought to adopt some artificial postmodern notion of civility and do everything we can to be politically correct so that people will always like us. Quite the opposite; he's saying, *Don't give the world any reasons to criticize us that are unrelated to the fact that they reject the truth we stand for*.

Brethren, this is not a complex issue at all: Crass, carnal, crude, gutter language and fleshly, self-indulgent, or erotic subject matter should not be the hallmarks of our ministry style.

Again: less than a decade ago, no one needed to stress that point. It simply wasn't controversial. And it *shouldn't* be controversial. Consider again the implications of that last verse in chapter 1: If you see practically *everything* as an opportunity for crass humor and filthy talk, what you are communicating to the culture is that both your mind and your conscience are defiled. And don't kid yourself: *every* culture, no matter how pagan, naturally reacts to filthy talk that way. Paul says those whose minds and consciences are that defiled are unfit for ministry.

So if you are someone who can fill your conversation (or your sermons) with filthy words, coarse joking, and carnal subject matter without a single pang of conscience: get out of the ministry. *Please*. The pulpit is a place where God's Word is to be proclaimed and God's truth is to be elevated in worship. It is the very last place where everything holy should be dragged into the gutter.

This problem has reached epidemic proportions lately. As I said earlier, I could cite dozens of examples, and there are hundreds more examples I wouldn't dare cite, because even mentioning them here would violate the principle I'm striving to affirm. Some things are too shameful even to be mentioned. Ephesians 5:12: "it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret." That is a fact our culture has worked hard to overthrow. The world thinks *everything*, no matter how shameful, needs to be brought out, dissected, and explored openly—even in mixed audiences. That's the idea underlying most of our culture's entertainment. The last thing the church should do is pretend the world has a valid point. Preachers don't need to subject their people to any more filth than the world already shoves down our throats.

There are two kinds of profanity every Christian needs to avoid. One is what the Bible calls foolish and filthy talk—coarse, obscene, smutty words that usually make reference to private bodily functions. The other is every kind of irreverence, ranging from that which trivializes sacred things to the full-on blasphemy of using the Lord's name in vain.

Scripture is not silent on such things. These are not gray areas. Blasphemy is a grievous sin, and that includes all kinds of flippancy when we use the Lord's name or talk about that which is sacred. Do a study of the third commandment and pay careful attention to all the things Scripture treats as a misuse of the Lord's name. Once you understand what the Bible says about flippant irreverence, if you're not compelled to eliminate every kind of joking about sacred things, you must have a heart of stone.

But (and don't miss this point): we're supposed to have some boundaries that we refuse to cross long *before* we ever get to the realm of actual blasphemy. Scripture commands us both in *positive* terms and in negative terms to keep our language clean and pure in every regard. Colossians 3 brings both negative and positive together (the negative in verse 8): "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth." Then verses 16-17 are positive: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

This is not a complex dichotomy. Again in positive terms, Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned." Or Ephesians 4:29: "[Use the kind of speech that] is good for building up, [that] fits the occasion, [so] that it may give grace to those who hear." But in negative terms, listen to the first part of Ephesians 4:29: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths." And a few verses later, in Ephesians 5:4: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place." Last fall, I did a whole message on Ephesians 5:1-4, dealing in careful detail with what that text means. You can download that message (for free) if you are looking for more on this subject. And while you are on line, look for a sermon I did a few months ago on the third commandment, especially if you aren't clear on how far-reaching the implications of that commandment are.

But this morning we have time only to get a quick overview. In that verse I just read (Ephesians 5:4), Paul uses three Greek words that describe the kind of language he commands us to avoid. In English, it's "filthiness . . . foolish talk . . . [and] crude joking." The Greek terms are *aischrotes*, meaning "obscenity, indecency, impurity." "Filthiness" is a fitting translation. It refers to language that has overtones of moral defilement. The jargon of the porn industry would epitomize the kind of thing this word applies to. It literally means "dirty words"—the stuff your mom probably threatened to wash your mouth out with soap for. Paul doesn't give a list of them, because he doesn't need to. Every culture has an unwritten list of them, and everyone pretty much knows what they are. If you seriously have no clue what they are, ask any schoolboy. They are the same words that affect the MPAA-ratings of movies. They are the calling-cards of carnal conversation. Notice, Paul doesn't say "avoid them as much as possible." He classifies it in exactly the same category as fornication, and he says with as much emphasis as possible, "let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints."

The second word in Ephesians 5:4 is *morologia*, meaning buffoonery. From the same Greek root as "moron." Stupid, silly, talk—and the context makes it clear that Paul has in mind the kind of moronic wordplay that characterizes so much of worldly conversation today—peppered with vile words, spicy subjects, lewd and erotic themes. The larger context here is all about sexual purity. Paul is talking mainly about sophomoric banter filled with sexual innuendo.

The third expression in Ephesians 5:4 is *eutrapelia*—"crude joking." In this context, that's pretty self-explanatory. But here's an interesting fact about this word. In secular Greek literature, that word was used in an almost entirely positive sense, to mean "cleverness." The Greek expression comes from words literally meaning "well turned." It evokes the idea of flexibility or versatility, and it basically refers to someone who is quick-witted. More specifically, it describes someone who is witty in a risque or off-color sense. "Crude Joking" is exactly the idea. Greek culture admired that trait (just like our culture today), but Scripture emphatically condemns it—and in Christian literature, that word was always used to denote something negative.

Paul has carefully chosen three expressions that pretty much cover all kinds of dirty words, filthy jokes, suggestive wordplay, erotic subject matter, filthy double-entendre—that which is bawdy, tasteless, or inappropriate in polite company. Notice: Those are the very kinds of things the gurus of contextualization are telling us we need to use in order to speak to our culture. Scripture says such things are not "proper among saints." Whose strategy should we pursue? It's not really a hard question, is it?

Someone says, *"Yes but Paul himself used the word skubalon, and that means dung or excrement."* Actually, that word had a range of possible meanings, and the way it was used in secular Greek literature explodes the myth that it was considered taboo. It was a strong word, certainly, and I have no doubt that Paul used it deliberately because it was strong. But it wasn't the sort of vile expression that was considered off limits in mixed company. It's sometimes translated "rubbish," and that's one of the possible connotations. But it is undoubtedly true that when he used this word in Philippians 3, Paul was not trying to be mild or tactful. He probably *did* use the word to signify dung—manure; feces—the worst kind of filth. But you don't need to use Saxon four-letter words in order to convey Paul's idea clearly.

Furthermore, that kind of strong speech was so far from being Paul's trademark that the few instances we find in the New Testament where Paul said crude things stand out boldly—which was Paul's design.

In fact, the only other instance of coarse language people usually point out in Paul is in Galatians 5:12, where Paul was answering the Judaizers. They insisted that uncircumcised Gentiles could not be saved unless they submitted to the ritual removal of their foreskins. Paul turned the logic of their

doctrine against them: if salvation can literally be gained through cutting off some flesh, why not go further? If circumcision was efficacious for justification, just think what castration could do for them.

Listen, it's easily possible to explain to English-speaking adults what Paul meant there—and it's even possible to use the same kind of sarcastic argument Paul used—without descending into the gutter to do it. Paul himself managed to say this without overthrowing his own dignity. What he says is shocking and forceful—perhaps the single most shocking thing Paul says anywhere. But He used no *vile* expressions. He wasn't being profane or obscene, and this grotesque imagery (the self-mutilation of someone who makes himself a eunuch) wasn't a foreign idea he injected into an unrelated subject just so he could turn the topic to something crude. This point was totally germane to the rational argument he was making, not merely a vulgar insult thrown in for crudeness' sake. It came at the end of four and a half chapters in which Paul carefully dismantled the Judaizers' doctrine. And earthy sarcasm like this *certainly* never became a defining element in Paul's style of polemical discourse. He has never been nicknamed "the cussing apostle."

Furthermore, there is a significant difference between strong language and obscene talk. Strong language is definitely needed more often than our postmodern culture wants to hear it, but *profane* language is *never* warranted, and it certainly has no place in the pulpit.

Didn't Luther sometimes employ scatological language? Yes, he did. Luther was particularly fond of flatulence jokes. He said he chased the devil away at night by breaking wind. At the entrance to the library in Wittenberg today, there's a book of cartoons by Luther's friend, Kranich, the artist. It's displayed under glass and for several years it has been permanently open to a page showing a cartoon of some Reformer defecating in the Pope's Mitre.

Luther was notorious for his ability to be crude like that in his conversations with students. But I don't know of any evidence that suggests he ever brought scatological language into the pulpit. And if you think Luther's use of vulgar insults against the Pope was one of his most effective polemic weapon, then you haven't read much church history. That cartoon is on display today as part of a studied effort to undermine Luther's influence by showing how foolishly he sometimes behaved. Do a Google search to find Luther's exchange with Sir Thomas More. It is appalling in the extreme. Language I wouldn't dare read from this pulpit. What Luther said to More was *shameful*, and the only response Luther got was an even worse flood of angry profanity from Sir Thomas More. Deliberately vulgar language and purposely erotic themes have never been helpful tools for the spread of the gospel. No wonder. If you are cultivating that style of conversation, you are being disobedient to what Scripture commands.

"What about Song of Solomon?" That's another aspect of the argument being set forth in favor of normalizing explicitly sexual language and subject matter in our churches. Listen: Song of solomon elevates the physical aspect of marital love by speaking of it in beautiful poetic and euphemistic

expressions that are suitable for reading in any audience. The current fad is precisely the opposite. It's nothing but soft-porn, smuggled into the church under the guise of relevance. But it's counter-relevant. The *last* thing our culture needs is for the world's obsession with sex to be mirrored in the message the church proclaims.

Seriously: when sex-challenges in evangelical churches are constantly grabbing the attention of the secular news media; when and the *New York Times*, CNN, ABC, and all the major secular news media are doing feature articles focusing on the raunchy language of one of evangelicalism best-known preachers, we've got a serious problem.

My dear mom, who taught me some of these principles through the judicious use of a bar of soap, went to heaven at the end of January, just five weeks ago. She had been stricken with an incurable muscle disease when I was in junior high school, so she lived with chronic weakness for more than 45 years. Her motto was a Bible verse—Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." She had a cross-stitched version of that verse, which she kept as a reminder.

Three times in the five weeks since my mom died—twice on nationwide television broadcasts (two separate interviews on large secular network programs) I've heard Mark Driscoll make a filthy, sophomoric joke about a certain sexual behavior, and that verse is always his punch line. "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."

Driscoll has told that joke repeatedly in the most public possible forums. In fact, the joke is so much a staple in his repertoire that it was featured in the New York Times article. Driscoll uses it as a throwaway line for a cheap laugh when the conversation turns to sex. He says he wants to "bring a breath of comedy and hipness to what can be an otherwise dull religious discussion." (Those are his words.) That is not at all what Paul was doing when he used the word *skubalon* or sarcastically condemned the judaizers. That sort of joke is a blatant misuse of the word of God. Frankly I don't think anyone could have told that joke in an evangelical context just a decade ago without eliciting a gasp of horror from Christians. But these days that kind of smutty humor featuring sacred things is all the rage. The sad thing is I'll probably never hear that verse again without thinking of Driscoll's smutty joke.

That's exactly what I'm talking about when I suggest that it's dangerously easy for bawdy talk and filthy jokes to cross the line into rank blasphemy. In fact, I'm prepared to argue that if you deliberately bring dirty jokes and lewd subject matter to the pulpit because you think that connects better with the culture than the pure truth of God's word, you are guilty of a sacrilege on the order of Nadab and Abihu. To use the words of Scripture in an obscene joke is a far worse defilement of what's holy than the sin of those who put the ark of God on an ox-cart.

Now our time is gone and I *need* to wrap up quickly. Let me close by saying this: *All* of us minister in ungodly cultures. I don't care how unchurched your community is or how trashy the subculture is that you have targeted, you need to be reverent and dignified—sound in doctrine *and* sound in speech. Those are the qualifications for a true minister, and they apply to every subculture.

Unclean lips are a disqualifying factor. That's one of the incidental points of Isaiah 6. Isaiah cursed himself and tried to hide, saying "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" When God called him to be a prophet, the first thing that happened was an angel cleansed those filthy lips with a hot coal. There's nothing truly prophetic about a trashmouth.

Again, that's just one of the *secondary* lessons of Isaiah 6. The central lesson is that God is ""Holy, holy, holy." Our lives and lips must reflect that.

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