

The Curse of Profanity

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We live in a society that freely uses many forms of speech including variations of the Lord's name and profanity. Although no legitimate Christian church counsels its members to regularly use the Lord's name in vain or to speak profanity, some may counsel more strongly against using such language than others.

Refraining from Taking the Lord's Name in Vain

Faithful Christians are expected to abide by the commandments of God, one of which requires that man "...shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Ex. 20:7). During the times of the Old Testament the violation of this commandment carried with it serious consequences—even death. In our time it is still a serious sin to use the Lord's name in vain, although the social and legal consequences have all but vanished.

Profanity Defiles Those Who Engage in it

The words that proceed forth from the mouth of an individual are meaningful, and the scriptures warn against profane speech. Jesus Christ said to his disciples "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man" (Matt. 15:11). The apostle Paul wrote regarding the unrighteous, "Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: 'Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness'" (Rom. 3:13–14). James likewise spoke of the speech of man

when he wrote, "But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be." (James 3:8–10.).

The Lord's Counsel to Eliminate Profanity

The counsel of the apostles and prophets of old on refraining from vulgar and unholy speech is still in full force today and spoken of by modern prophets. The Lord has exclaimed: "Keep yourselves from evil to take the name of the Lord in vain, for I am the Lord your God, even the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob" (D&C 136:21).

The prophet Spencer W. Kimball wrote, "Speaking the Lord's name with reverence must simply be part of our lives as members of the Church. For example...do not use foul language. We do not curse or defame. We do not use the Lord's name in vain. It is not difficult to become perfect in avoiding a swearing habit, for if one closes his mouth and does not swear, he is on the way to perfection in that matter" (Spencer W. Kimball, "President Kimball Speaks against Profanity," *Tambuli*, Sept. 1981, 1)

The First Presidency in 1887 wrote: "The habit...which some young people fall into, of using vulgarity and profanity ... is not only offensive to well-bred persons, but it is a gross sin in the sight of God, and should not exist..." (Messages of the First Presidency, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75, 3:112–13).

Proper Speech Defines a Christian

Christians everywhere are urged to be examples "of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). The prophet Gordon B. Hinckley addressed the subject of language in a 1987 article when he wrote: "Foul talk defiles the man who speaks it. If you have the habit, how do you break it? You begin by making a decision to change. The next time you are prone to use words you know to be wrong, simply stop. Keep quiet or say what you have to say in a different way. As you practice such restraint, it will become easy. Don't swear. Don't profane. Avoid so-called dirty jokes. Stay away from conversation that is sprinkled with foul and filthy words. You will be happier if you do so, and your example will give strength to others. May you be

blessed so to do..." (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Take Not the Name of God in Vain," Ensign, Nov. 1987, 44)

George Washington as an Example of Clean Speech

George Washington, the first president of the United States, upon learning that some of his officers were using profanity wrote the following in a much publicized letter on July 1, 1776: "The General is sorry to be informed that the foolish and wicked practice of profane cursing and swearing, a vice hitherto little known in our American Army is growing into fashion. He hopes that the officers will, by example as well as influence, endeavor to check it and that both they and the men will reflect that we can little hope of the blessing of Heaven on our army if we insult it by our impiety and folly. Added to this it is a vice so mean and low without any temptation that every man of sense and character detests and despises it" (The Papers, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 5, June - August 1776, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 551-52).

The Challenge of Maintaining Clean Speech

Many of us grew up, and so many still do today, in a culture of profanity and loose language. Kids are exposed to hearing the Lord's name in vain and profanity in schools, on the play ground, and even in their homes. In doing so they become part of the culture who uses the Lord's name in vain and speaks profanity without even thinking about it.

This practice carries over with them as adults, although many will temper over time as they mature and realize the fallacy of such language. Still, most will never think twice about saying "Oh God," or "Christ" as part of putting emphasis into a sentence. Still others will occasionally use profanity to accent certain points or blurt out such references in anger.

In some strong Christian cultures however one can find a startling absence of profanity. When a Christian community lives and acts upon the foundation of the scriptures; with guidance and counsel from modern day prophets, they can develop a culture that strongly abstains from using the Lord's name in vain, while shunning any and all forms of profanity and rudeness. Over time they will become sensitive to hearing the Lord's

name, profanity, and rudeness and will be easily offended when it takes place in conversations, movies, music, and other occasions where such language is used.

Conclusion

Christians are counseled "to live in the world but not be of the world." We can't control the language of others or how they choose to use the Lord's name. We can certainly have an influence on others, but ultimately it comes down to moral agency. We can walk out of offensive movies, refrain from listening to rude music, or abstain from events and environments where unclean language is the norm. Although we can't keep away from it altogether, we are assured that by keeping ourselves clean from speaking the Lord's name irreverently or any other form of profanity and rudeness that we will be a happier people and be in a better position to live with our Heavenly Father—where no unclean thing can dwell.

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