

Taming of the Tongue

As we consider the instructions of the New Testament, one thing becomes perfectly clear: God's expectations for His people are not always going to be easy! As we have discussed in previous lessons, God has set a high standard for His people, and expects that they are going to strive to live up to that standard. As we turn our attention to the way that we use our tongues, we need to see the standard set by God, as well as the difficulties of meeting those expectations. As we study this important subject, keep in mind that just because something is difficult to practice, it does not mean that we should not work diligently to meet His expectations!

There is much said in scripture concerning the way we talk, and the manner in which we use our mouths. There may be more instruction, as well as warnings, given concerning this aspect of our lives than any other individual topic!

The Tongue: Hard to Control

To get a start on understanding the need for the Christian to be concerned about and to be focused on controlling the tongue, we can look at the letter from James. First, we need to recognize the importance of controlling the tongue:

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless (James 1:26).

If you think you are doing well in your service before God, but are not bridling the tongue, then you are only deceiving your own heart! Notice that James says this one's "religion is useless." Putting on some show of serving God is not doing any good. Part of serving Him acceptably is learning to control the tongue. Even as James says this, he knows how difficult this task is. Later in his epistle, he would make it clear that this is a difficult feat:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh (James 3:1–12).

Of every aspect of our lives, the tongue is the most difficult to control. James used a couple of examples to illustrate the point. Something so small can be so influential in our lives. Like the horse, a large beast of burden that surely has the strength to overcome a man, can have a bit put in his

mouth and be controlled with relative ease. James also used the example of a ship. The large ship is easily controlled by the relatively small rudder. Such a small element can still possess so much power! Likewise, the tongue contains power. It can be power for good, but far too often it is used for the power of evil. It, being small, can still kindle a great forest fire. Some of the characteristics that James reveals are quite frightening. He speaks of the tongue being a “fire, a world of iniquity.” He said that the tongue “sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.” James was clearly trying to paint a vivid picture! The association of these wicked ways of using the tongue are tied directly to the influence of Hell!

James went on to say that “no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.” It almost sounds like James is saying that the tongue is beyond control, and therefore there is no reason to try! Some people have concluded that God knows we can’t control the tongue, so it doesn’t really matter what we say, or how we use our tongues. As we continue through our study, we will see clearly that this assessment is not true.

James showed how the tongue is often used in a contradictory manner. He said that the same tongue often spits forth both blessing of God and the cursing of men (who have been made in the similitude of God). How can the same mouth put out both blessing and cursing? James used two examples to show how this should not be so. First, he used the example of spring. Can it put out fresh, good water and bitter water at the same time? Surely not! The second example is that of a fig tree and grapevine. Is it possible for those plants to bear two different kinds of fruit? Certainly not! James said this duplicity should not be true about the tongue either! This tells us that though the tongue is difficult to control, God’s expectation is that we strive to do just that. How can we let both good things and evil come out of our mouths without concern?

For the rest of this lesson, we want to look at various aspects of how we use our tongues, and how the scriptures instruct us in these areas. While learning to control our tongues is no easy task, these passages emphasize just how important it is to work toward it!

Profanity

Probably the first thing we think of when we consider the misuse of our tongues is profanity. Profanity is defined:

- 1a: the quality or state of being profane*
- b: the use of profane language*
- 2a: profane language*
- b: an utterance of profane language¹*

Because the definition includes the idea of profane, we should also consider that definition:

- 1: not concerned with religion or religious purposes : SECULAR*
- 2: not holy because unconsecrated, impure, or defiled : UNSANCTIFIED*
- 3a: serving to debase or defile what is holy : IRREVERENT*
- b: OBSCENE, VULGAR*
- 4a: not being among the initiated*
- b: not possessing esoteric or expert knowledge²*

By looking at these definitions, it becomes evident that what is profane (i.e., profanity) stands contrary to all that is holy. If we are devoted to being holy, then that which is profane must be

1 “Profanity.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/profanity>. Accessed 19 Jul. 2020.

2 “Profane.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/profane>. Accessed 19 Jul. 2020.

removed from our lives! Paul said it this way:

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers (Ephesians 4:29).

Notice the contrast that Paul established here. It is very similar to that used by James. James said that good and bad shouldn't come from the same mouth. Paul said that we need to do away with every "corrupt word" and instead only allow that which is "good for necessary edification." This sets a standard by which we should gauge every word that comes out of our mouths! God's expectation for us is holiness. Lacking that holiness can and will keep us out of a relationship with God:

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: (Hebrews 12:14)

That establishes a high standard for the followers of Christ. We cannot have a relationship with Him if we have not been pursuing holiness, the opposite of profanity!

The words that come out of our mouths reflect what we have in our hearts. Jesus proclaimed this teaching that should get our attention:

Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:34-37).

If we are going to be judged by the words that come out of our mouths, we better be very careful about what words we use! Some contend that God does not really care if we use profanity or not. They say that God "has greater things to worry about!" We are often deceived by these types of thoughts and arguments, because they conform to what we want to do. Jesus said that we will be either justified or condemned by our words! This should be a startling thought for us.

We've already seen that James said the tongue is very hard to control. This is particularly true when it comes to profanity. Unfortunately, profanity has become an acceptable part of our society. It is either thought of as "not very bad" or "not bad at all." Because of this, we hear it constantly. It is heard in nearly every venue we frequent. It is now acceptable even in times and places that would have been rejected just a generation ago! Because we are so inundated with it, it becomes embedded in our minds. When that becomes the case, it is very difficult for it to not be expressed from our mouths!

Let us take Paul's instruction to heart: "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth..." Let's make that our goal, and work toward it constantly. Might we slip up? Of course. However, we need to treat this sin, this violation of God's teaching, just as we do any other, and be devoted to repenting of our transgression and committing to doing better. Instead of being dismissive of this behavior, we should take it as seriously as Jesus did.

Euphemisms

Euphemisms are very similar to profanities. A euphemism is the substitution of a *less offensive* word in place of a *more offensive* one. Sometimes, euphemism is used to describe a phrase that is merely less harsh than another. "Pass away" is a euphemism for "died." We are not talking about that type of communication. Instead, we are talking about substituting a word or phrase for a profanity. The purpose is often to be less offensive (notice, it is not that we are trying not to be offensive at all) than using profanity. Consider that when we use this type of euphemism, we are often causing the person listening to us to think about the profanity we are replacing. We are still conveying the

exact same idea as if we had used the profanity in the first place. If this is the case, then what advantage or benefit is there to the substitution?

Perhaps this manner of speaking is not as detrimental as the profanity we discussed earlier. Perhaps, we think of it as something that is not as clearly condemned and therefore may be okay for us to use. We should remember the instruction of Jesus once more: *“But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.”* Are these words idle? Or are they used for “necessary edification”?

The challenge of this study is to raise the standard against which we measure ourselves. Rather than judging our language against what we hear every day around us, we should judge our language based upon the instructions we find in scripture. While that standard is quite high, following it will lead us closer to being like Christ, which is our ultimate goal in life!

Lying

Lying is one of those things that most people today think of as being insignificant. It has become an acceptable part of our society. While it may be frowned upon in some circumstances, it is vastly accepted as a part of life. In fact, we have even developed a scale to judge the acceptability of lying. If we are only telling “little white lies” we are not doing anything wrong! We also devise ways to justify various types of lying. If my lie is going to spare someone’s feelings, then it is acceptable. If my lie is going to keep me from getting fired, then it is acceptable. If my lie is going to prevent something really bad from happening, then it is acceptable. We come up with many different reasons to accept that lying is a perfectly reasonable thing for us to do!

However, the scriptures clearly paint a different picture of this topic. No where in the New Testament do we find a circumstance in which it is acceptable to lie. In fact, just the opposite is true. For example, Jesus made it clear that Satan is the father of lies:

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it (John 8:44).

When a person lies, they are not following Christ, but rather following the devil! Jesus could not make it any more plain that lying is a sign of who one is following. If our goal is truly to become more like Christ, we cannot continue to follow after the devices of the devil.

Paul included lying in with other sinful practices, many of which we readily accept as evil:

But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust (1 Timothy 1:8–11).

John’s vision in the book of Revelation confirmed the seriousness of this sin:

But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

So, while we minimize the seriousness of this sinful practice, the scriptures are very plain. Lying is a sign that we are following the devil. Lying is just as much a sin as murder, fornication, kidnapping, etc. Those who are liars will receive the same condemnation and punishment as the cowardly,

murderers and such like! Just because something has become acceptable in our society does not mean that God has to change His standard. Just the opposite is true. God expects His people to be different, to stand out from the crowd. He expects His people to act differently than the world!

Filthiness

Ephesians 5:4 addresses 3 different aspects of the way that we use our tongues. The first is translated as *filthiness*. This word carries with it the basic idea of *obscenity*. Like many lists that Paul provides for the reader, he became more specific as he progressed. So, this first word in the list is the most general, and can include many different aspects of our language. Some of what we have already discussed under the heading of Profanity above would fit into Paul's idea in using this particular word. Much more broadly, this word includes all that is "shameful immoral and wicked. Obscenity, indecency, nastiness, and all that is base in deed or speech must be taken into account (Rom. 6:21)."³

By using this word, Paul made it clear that no language that depicts worldliness, or ungodliness should be coming from the mouth of the believer. This is not something that we can just dismiss as inconsequential, or insignificant. We have already seen that what comes from our mouth is reflective of what is in our hearts. So, if we are allowing filthiness to come from our mouths, we are showing the world that our hearts are filled with that filthiness. One cannot claim to have a heart for God and His righteousness, and then allow obscene language to flow forth from the mouth!

Sometimes we think, "That person has no filter!" Paul's admonition against *filthiness* would often condemn those that seem to have no ability to filter the things that come from their mouths. They talk about things that should not be a part of what we often call "polite conversation." While they may not use profanity or blatant obscenity, the very topics they want to be talking about are reflective of that which is "shameful, immoral and wicked." It is full of indecency and nastiness!

Do we, as Christians, think about the types of things that we are saying to other people? Are our conversations leading others to stumble because we talk about wickedness and worldliness frequently? Do we entice others to participate in ungodliness because we are talking about it in some great detail? Paul said this filthiness should not be a part of our conversation!

Foolish Talking

The second aspect of our speech that Paul addressed in Ephesians 5:4 is that of *foolish talking*. This word has to do with talking in a way that shows that one is not directed by spiritual things. While broad in application, this word is more narrow than the previous one. Foolish talking is a subset of filthiness. Foolish talking lacks the forethought, or planning that comes with being truly spiritually minded. It is missing the application of wisdom that comes from having a truly spiritual mindset.

Here, Paul was not talking about the idea of casual conversation. He was not condemning the idea of being able to talk about anything other than scripture, or spiritual things. He is, however, identifying the idea that all of our conversations should be directed by our spiritual endeavors. Even when we are discussing things of a secular nature, we are allowing those conversations to be controlled by our spiritual focus. When we have a truly biblical worldview, nothing is outside the purview of that manner of life. So, we will always seek to use biblical wisdom to guide our discussions. We are not going to allow worldly influences to cause us to speak in a way that would belie our true focus and allegiance.

A good example of this type of foolish talking is euphemisms which we discussed earlier. While

3 Caldwell, C.G., *Truth Commentaries, Ephesians*. Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1994. p. 232

these may not be profanity, and they may not (if we technically dissect the language itself) be obscene, we can ask the question: Does it reflect the spiritual wisdom that we desire to show to those around us, those to whom we are an example? Is it a reflection of the spiritual nature that we claim to possess?

Course Jesting

The third word that Paul used in this list of words addressing our language is translated as *course jesting*. The English Standard Version translates this word as *crude joking*. The idea is that those who claim to be Christians are not to participate in the humor that shows worldliness rather than righteousness.

The most obvious application of this word is what we would identify as being *dirty jokes*. Jokes that are filled with profanity would obviously be condemned under our previous discussions. This word takes the idea further in identifying the use of humor to convey topics that are crude or obscene themselves. This is not so much about the words that are used, but rather the ideas that are communicated. For example, there are many who tell jokes that are filled with innuendo and/or double entendre. These communications are shielded in plausible deniability, with the speaker (if condemned) claiming that they didn't say anything untoward, and that the listener must be at fault. This is merely a way to express worldly, and often profane or obscene ideas in a more socially acceptable manner. This certainly should never be a part of the Christian's conversation!

Course jesting goes beyond the idea of just telling dirty, or profane jokes. Brother Caldwell, in his commentary on Ephesians said this:

*"It involves spicy language fitted to the moods and conditions of the listeners. It refers to immoral language or joking which is time-serving. A sly question, a smart answer, a shrewd intimation, a clever retort, or a lustful joke can fill the bill when describing this sin."*⁴

Sometimes, we fall into the trap of mistreating brethren through our use of these devices of humor. We think we are just being funny, but when we are using our humor to harm others, it falls into the category that Paul is here condemning. This has become common practice on social media, where it is easy to join together with people who agree with us, and then mock those who do not. We often develop a way of thinking that justifies the way we treat others, but become upset, and defensive when others treat us the same way. When we toss out sarcasm to mock others, we may very well be entering into the area that Paul is condemning here.

We do need to be careful that we do not take Paul's instruction here further than what he intended. He is not, for example condemning all humor, nor is he condemning the use of things such as sarcasm when they are warranted to make a point. He did this occasionally in his letters to the Corinthians. Some Christians have incorrectly concluded that all joking is ungodly and should not be used by the Christian. God created in us a sense of humor and He wants us to use it just as we use every other part of our nature. He wants us to use it within the confines of what He has described as godly! If we are using sarcasm merely as a way of mocking our brethren with whom we disagree, then we are not using that tool in a manner that is consistent with the scriptures. We are, in fact, participating in the kind of course jesting that God would reject.

Too often, we are drawn away into these areas by being caught up with a group of people who are of similar mind to us when it comes to secular matters. It has become much easier to associate only with those who agree with us on nearly everything. When we join into these types of groups, and then mock those who would think differently, we are entering into the realm of this course jesting

4 Caldwell, C.G., *Truth Commentaries, Ephesians*. Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1994. p. 232

that Paul was condemning.

This type of humor has no place in the life of the Christian. How does this provide “edification” to the hearers? This is an easy trap to fall into, and therefore is one that we must be on guard for. Just because the people around us think it funny does not mean that it is appropriate. We must also consider how others who hear may receive it!

Gossip

The term gossip is only used 1 time in the New Testament in the New King James Version of the Bible. The English Standard and Christian Standard translations have the word present 3 times. The concept is found a few more times in the Old Testament, most notably in the wisdom literature. The Christian Standard Bible translates the word that is used as gossip, while other translations use words such as whisperer, slanderer or talebearer. All of these words are very closely related, thus the manner in which translators have interchanged them. There are, however, in various passages slight differences. For example, the ESV translates Romans 1:28-31 as:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Here, there are two words that convey closely related, yet different ideas. The word translated as gossips here is defined:

33.405 ψιθυριστής, οὗ m: one who habitually engages in gossip—‘gossiper.’ πεπληρωμένους πάση ἀδικίᾳ ... ψιθυριστάς ‘they are filled with all kinds of wickedness ... they are gossipers’ Ro 1:29.⁵

So then, what is gossip? Merriam Webster defines gossip as:

1a dialectal British : GODPARENT

b: COMPANION, CRONY

c: a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others

2a: rumor or report of an intimate nature

b: a chatty talk

c: the subject matter of gossip⁶

We are mostly concerned with the second definition here. Gossip has to do with talking to others about things that we have no business discussing. Going to a third party to discuss intimate details about someone else is generally gossip. We will often try to act as if our actions are justified because we are “trying to help” that other person. While there may be occasion to ask advice on how to help another, typically that is only a ruse to open the door for us to talk about the life of someone else.

Christians should be cautious not to talking about others in a manner that would be gossip. When we start a conversation with, “Did you hear about so-and-so?”, we are probably heading into the

⁵ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 434. Print.

⁶ “Gossip.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gossip>. Accessed 9 Aug. 2020.

realm of gossip! One good way to evaluate our conversation is to think about being on the other side. The golden rule is effective here. If I would not want someone else talking about me in this manner, then I should not be talking about them either! Far too often, we are quick to talk about things we have no business discussing. In the midst of this, we can (and do) spread false information and rumors that are unsubstantiated.

It is interesting to note that the measuring stick of “gossip” is not just determining whether what is being said is true or not. It might very well be true, but it still should not be said!

Boasting

Boasters is another one of the sins that Paul listed in Romans chapter 1, as translated by the New King James:

being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents... (Romans 1:29–30)

This is one of several sins of the tongue that Paul cited in this passage. Along with *boasters*, he also condemned *whisperers* (gossip, see previous section) and *backbiters*, as well as several other sins that would be made manifest through the use of the tongue.

This word means:

88.220 ἀλαζών, ὄνομα: (derivative of ἀλαζονεία ‘pretentious pride,’ 88.219) one who is pretentiously proud and given to bragging about it— ‘braggart, arrogant person.’ ἔσονται γὰρ οἱ ἄνθρωποι φίλαυτοι, φιλάργυροι, ἀλαζόνες ‘for there will be people who are lovers of themselves, lovers of money, braggarts’ 2 Tm 3:2. In a number of languages an arrogant person is described figuratively as ‘one who speaks big words about himself’ or ‘one whose mouth is too big for his body.’⁷

This is the person that talks about himself all the time. He is proud, and it becomes evident through the way he talks of himself. No matter what the topic, he has something to brag about! The problem with this sin of the tongue is the same as many other sins: pride. The solution is to learn true humility.

Being boastful is symptomatic of being self-centered. This is not a surprising result of the society that we currently live in. If we have been indoctrinated to believe that we are, as individuals, the most important thing in the world, then it is a natural conclusion to have everyone competing to tell others how great they are. But, as Christians, our focus is not to be on self, but rather on Christ and God the Father.

For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6:13–14).

What do we have to boast in? If we are going to boast, it should not be something about ourselves, but rather the boasting we can do in Christ. What is the value in boasting in secular things? We as Christians are supposed to be focused on the spiritual. What do we have to boast in spiritual things? We can do nothing of ourselves, it is God who has done all worth boasting for. We need to recognize our place, and see that we are nothing without Him. If that is true, and we are able to realize it, then we will see that we have nothing to boast about for ourselves!

⁷ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 764. Print.

It is interesting to note that Paul did write quite a bit about how he could boast about others. The difference was that he was talking about the good that others were doing, and that they were not talking about their own good works. In 2 Corinthians 9, for example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians about their contribution to the saints who were suffering from the famine in Judea. He wrote about how he had boasted about their help, and now he was trying to make sure his boasting on them was not in vain.

Now concerning the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you; for I know your willingness, about which I boast of you to the Macedonians, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal has stirred up the majority. Yet I have sent the brethren, lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this respect, that, as I said, you may be ready; lest if some Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we (not to mention you!) should be ashamed of this confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time, and prepare your generous gift beforehand, which you had previously promised, that it may be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation (2 Corinthians 9:1–5).

While Paul's writing here could very well be a tactic to shame the Corinthians into fulfilling the obligation they had committed to, it is still evident that Paul spoke of how he boasted about that commitment to others.

As Christians, we should be focused on others, not ourselves. So, instead of bragging about our own accomplishments, our own talents, we should be more focused on what God can and does do. We have nothing to boast about, for whatever we accomplish is merely the result of being an instrument of the Lord. So, let us boast in Him, and in His people around us, and let us remove the focus from ourselves!

Blasphemy

This word means:

βλασφημέω; βλασφημία, ας f: to speak against someone in such a way as to harm or injure his or her reputation (occurring in relation to persons as well as to divine beings)—‘to revile, to defame, to blaspheme, reviling.’

βλασφημέω: μηδένα βλασφημεῖν ‘no one should defame another’ Tt 3:2; καὶ μὴ καθὼς βλασφημούμεθα ‘and not as I have been reviled’ Ro 3:8; τὸ γὰρ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ δι’ ὑμᾶς βλασφημεῖται ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ‘for the name of God is reviled by the Gentiles because of you’ Ro 2:24; οἱ δὲ παραπορευόμενοι ἐβλασφήμουν αὐτόν ‘those who went along reviled him’ Mt 27:39.

βλασφημία: ψευδομαρτυρία, βλασφημία ‘false witness, reviling’ Mt 15:19.

One way in which βλασφημέω and βλασφημία were used in speaking of ‘defaming God’ was by claiming some kind of equality with God. Any such statement was regarded by the Jews of biblical times as being harmful and injurious to the nature of God.⁸

So, ultimately, this word means to speak against, defame or revile another. Usually, when we are discussing this concept it has to do with our speaking out against God. One of the most common accusations cast against Jesus was that He was blaspheming by making Himself equal with God (Matthew 9:3, 26:65, etc...) This was only one way that the Jews defined the word *blasphemy*. Of course, if Jesus was not equal with God, then his claims would have been blasphemous (see Philippians 2:5-11). This was not, however, the only way that the word is used in scripture, and should not be the only way that consider its application.

⁸ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 433. Print.

The word blasphemy is used to describe any type of language that is used to speak against God. While the Jews were particularly disturbed by Jesus' claims to be God, and thus condemned Him for blasphemy, His speech was not done (if true) to speak against God. The term was used for those who would speak in a way to do harm to God's reputation or influence, or speak against His teachings. It is interesting to note that this sin could be committed in complete ignorance. Consider what Paul wrote about himself:

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief (1 Timothy 1:12–13).

Paul described himself as a “blasphemer” even though he was completely convinced in his mind that what he was doing was right at the time (Acts 23:1). Paul was religious. He thought he was serving God. But, in reality, he was speaking against God and His will. This is prevalent today as well! How many people think they are serving God, when in reality they teaching and practicing things that are contrary to His will? Some of the very practices that have become commonplace speak directly against God and His will for us. Consider the idea of denominationalism. The idea behind denominationalism is that God must accept as many bodies as men can create as being His. In scripture, we find that God calls for unity, and condemns division plainly. Consider a few examples:

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, (Philippians 1:27)

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. (Philippians 2:1–2)

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10–13)

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal? (1 Corinthians 3:1–4)

These passages make it clear that God wants unity among His people, not division. So, when men come along and tell us that the division is acceptable to God, with some even proclaiming that this division (denominationalism) is a good thing, they are speaking against God and His teaching! This is blasphemy! We have no right to change the instructions of God to suit our desires, or the desires of others. Denominations, by their very nature, speak against the will of God.

It is also noteworthy that our actions can cause others to blaspheme. When we teach one thing, but practice another, the people who are watching us will speak ill of God and His word. Paul wrote that Christians who do not practice what they preach cause others to blaspheme the Lord:

You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through break-

ing the law? For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written. (Romans 2:21–24).

Taking the Lord’s Name in Vain

Another sin, that is often closely related with blasphemy, is taking the name of the Lord in vain. This was a command from the time of the giving of the law of Moses (the 10 commandments):

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. (Exodus 20:7)

However, most have lost all concept of what it means to take the name of the Lord in vain. This is yet another practice that has become so prevalent that we think little of it as a society. The idea of taking the Lord’s name in vain is to speak it in a way that does not bring it the proper honor. When the name of the Lord has become a byword, we are most certainly taking His name in vain. He requires that we treat Him (and His name) with the proper honor.

The children of Israel would violate this instruction through their oaths. They would “swear upon” something, and if that object was held in high enough esteem, they would feel obligated to honor the oath. Jesus addressed this very idea:

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. (Matthew 23:16–22)

This thought process had led them to swear upon God Himself. Jesus said the best practice was to not swear on anything at all. If you are honest, just let your word speak for itself!

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33–37)

Today, the same type of problem arises as was present for the Israelites. People are quick to “swear to God!” They believe that this type of oath brings more validity to what they are saying. Of course, most of the time, when we hear this come from a person’s mouth, we realize that they are telling us that they are not quite so honest the rest of the time!

Taking the name of the Lord in vain has become a part of our casual, modern vernacular. Consider how often you hear someone declare “Oh my God!” Such has become nothing more than a modern exclamation. It is used to express surprise or amazement, but is rarely used to actually give any honor to God. It is, in its purest sense, truly a vain expression! This has even been degraded to the shorthand “OMG!” Anyone who has social media will see this multiple times in a day. It is texted out by some quite frequently, and even stickers and emojis, designed for quick communication, have this built in. It has been made tremendously easy to take the name of the Lord in vain!

Some think this is an issue that is of very little importance. However, when we consider the fact that God made this one of his first codified instructions to His people, and that He has demanded that we treat Him with honor, we should see the significance for us. How we use the name of the

Lord reveals much about us. Is it merely a flippant exclamation, nothing more than another expletive we have incorporated into our language? Or do we use it to show glory and honor to our heavenly Father? It is interesting that the Jews, upon being given this instruction, took it so seriously that they would often not use the name of Jehovah at all. In fact, most of our modern translations have the term LORD in place of Jehovah because the translators honored the Jewish custom of making that change to show respect for the name of God. While God never required anything like that, it does reflect the completely different approach that we see in their culture and our present one!

Complaining and Arguing

Paul had quite a bit to say about how Christians were to treat one another with their tongues. Here we will look at a couple of examples. First, in his letter to the Philippian brethren, Paul wrote:

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. (Philippians 2:14–16)

When we become very self-centered, we often resort to the problem of complaining and disputing. We argue with one another over pointless (in the long run) issues. We complain about not getting our way, or we complain about how someone else has done something. Clearly, Paul was not addressing the need to deal with false doctrine and false teachers. He was not saying that we are to let those continue without comment. He was, however addressing the need we have to conduct ourselves with the proper demeanor. Are we grumblers? Or are we “blameless and harmless children of God...”?

To the Christians in Galatia, Paul wrote:

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! (Galatians 5:13–15)

Paul here was addressing the topic of circumcision. While circumcision was not necessary for salvation, and he had fought against the Judaizing teachers who were insisting it was, Paul reminded the brethren that they were not to use their new-found liberty as a way of attacking and beating up on their brothers. If they were going to “bite and devour one another” they would be destroyed.

Concluding Thoughts...

There is much that we can discuss as it pertains to our tongues. God has a high standard, and He expects us to strive to live up to that standard. It is not good enough for us to dismiss His expectations simply because they are not easy to attain to. While some see these sins of the tongue to be insignificant, God does not. When we say, “We are only human...” and “God understands...” we are making excuses for our own disobedience.

When we falter, we must be devoted to turning back to God and following His will. When we slip and let that cuss word escape our lips, or we take the name of the Lord in vain, we need to repent. When we use our tongues in a manner that does not provide edification, we need to correct ourselves, and determine to do better. Let us allow Paul’s instruction guide the use of our tongues:

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers (Ephesians 4:29).

Questions

1. James said that it is difficult to tame the tongue. Does this mean that Christians should not make any attempt to do so? Why or why not?
2. How should a Christian view profanity? How significant is it to avoid? What about euphemisms?
3. How does God view lying? How seriously has He addressed this topic?
4. What 3 phrases did Paul use in Ephesians 5:4 to address how we use our tongues?
5. How might a person be involved in course jesting? What responsibility does the Christian have to avoid such?
6. How might gossip be destructive in Christian relationships?
7. Should the Christian boast about their own accomplishments and achievements? Why or why not?
8. What is blasphemy? How are blasphemy and taking the Lord's name in vain similar?
9. How does arguing and complaining destroy Christian relationships? How can we avoid such?

