

Sound Doctrine, Sound Words

by Phil Johnson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of sound doctrine and behavior in ministry, and warns against the trend of using coarse language and sexual themes in preaching.

Duration: 1:01:10

Scripture: Isaiah 6:5-7, Ephesians 4:29, Ephesians 5:4, Colossians 3:8, Titus 2:7-8

Topics: "Pastoral Ministry", "Christian Integrity"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of maintaining dignity, purity, and sound speech in ministry, contrasting the trend of using profanity and lewd content in preaching. It highlights the need for pastors to be examples of good works, integrity, and reverence, following the instructions given by Paul to Titus. The message warns against adopting worldly language and subject matter in the pulpit, stressing the significance of upholding sanctified behavior and speech in all aspects of ministry.

Transcript

This morning I want to look at two verses in Titus chapter 2, verses 7 and 8. Titus 2, verses 7 and 8. This is an admonition from Paul to Titus. His friend, his partner, his protege, his 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. And Paul writes to Titus with these instructions. Titus 2, verses 7 and 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 things like profanity, crude and obscene words, vile subject matter, carnal topics, graphic sexual imagery, erotic language, filthy jokes. Things like that are making their way into preaching even. Most of you, I know, are aware of that trend that 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 you 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 this large and this diverse, I could not get away from this issue.

I tried, trust me. I couldn't. 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. And here's the lead sentence. Mark Driscoll's sermons are mostly too racy to post on an evangelical family-friendly website.

Opening sentence, New York Times. And 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 public 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 by 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 that 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 and foolish talk and crude joking, but they feel we need to overlook these trends in the younger men and keep silence in public so that the delicate fabric of evangelical unity isn't torn asunder by a controversy over words. Because frankly, I think this whole issue probably would not be controversial at all if a handful of respected Christian leaders would simply step up and deal with this matter boldly and biblically. Sadly, evangelical tolerance for shenanigans in the pulpit has undergone a monumental change in the past couple of decades, just in my lifetime, 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 would like to show you some examples of the kind of thing I'm talking about so that you understand I'm not exaggerating.

On the other hand, most of these things are so thoroughly inappropriate that there is 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'm talking about. Here's a handful of more or less sanitized examples.

There is a group called XXX Church, who say they are targeting porn addicts and people who work in the so-called adult entertainment industry. XXX Church. They sponsor a booth at all the major porn conventions where they say they're doing evangelism, and they hand out Bibles and wear T-shirts stenciled with a deliberately ambiguous slogan that I think is, because of the ambiguity of it, I think it is blasphemous.

The slogan, Jesus loves porn stars. That's printed on the front of the Bibles they distribute, and the centerpiece of their display is a 15-foot inflatable phallus. They painted a face on this abomination and given it a name.

And I want to tell you, XXX Church is not some obscure anomaly that I dug up out of somewhere. You will find links to their website on literally hundreds of church websites from churches who support and promote what XXX Church 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. And I won't give you their website because it's pornographic.

In a group this size, I think it's likely that some of you guys may even have links to organizations and resources like that on your church websites. And if so, shame on you. And you need to rethink what you're doing.

Strategies like that invariably employ purposely suggestive images and speech that is calculated to be erotic. And I have no doubt whatsoever that that kind of thing lures Christians into the porn culture. And I know for a fact that those things are a deadly stumbling block for people who have been saved out of that lifestyle.

To claim that it's necessary deliberately to be seductive and use strategies like that to draw people to Christ out of a culture that is already obsessed with everything erotic, that's a lie. That's not necessary. It also ignores the reality of what has actually happened to the evangelical movement over the past decade.

And 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's being made. Here's a typical comment I found posted in a Southern Baptist discussion in one of these online forums where this was the topic under discussion.

The guy who wrote this seems to be a youth pastor or a college minister. He says this, quote, Any Christian who says the words on the FCC's dirty word list are bad is judgmental and hence pushing away millions of the lost simply because they use different syllables than we do. God gives us no list of abusive words, he says.

In a discussion with a sinner in a bar, the F word sometimes just means very. And then he says this, I have won many people in our community to Christ by dropping the F bomb, and that is no lie. Any word, he says, 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 wondered that because no one really believes that's necessary or a legitimate form of contextualization. My friend Todd Friel points out that you can watch the 11 o'clock news on any television station in Seattle and you won't find them using porn slang and gutter talk to communicate the daily headlines to their viewers.

And you know what? None of their viewers are demanding for the news to be translated into cuss words so that they can understand what's 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 city in America, then 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 trying to tell us it is? This approach to relevance has swept the evangelical community in a very short time. Just three years ago, here at the Shepherds Conference, I did a seminar

on discussing the pros and cons of Rick Warren's 40 Days of Purpose.

And I was talking about evangelical fads and a bunch of people asked me, what do you think the next fad is going to be? And I always say, I don't know. If I could invent the fads, I could probably be really rich. But who can predict? Well, that was three years ago, 40 Days of Purpose.

Today, the latest rage in the evangelical community is 40 Days of Sex, or some variation on that theme. And I'm not kidding. Ed Young Jr., pastor of the third largest church in America, got nationwide news coverage on every major network because he gave a series on sex with a giant bed on the platform as a prop.

And he sat on that bed and he announced that he was issuing a seven-day sex challenge to the congregation. Here's how the Dallas Morning News reported the story. Quote, God may have rested on the seventh day, but the Reverend 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 the 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 also got a lot of news coverage for issuing a 30-day sex challenge. And apparently 30 days turned out to be too rigorous.

So, most of the churches that have followed suit have scaled down the demand a little bit. But suddenly, suddenly that kind of eroticism from the pulpit is all the rage. Time Magazine noticed the trend last summer and did a major article about it in one of their June issues titled, And God Said, Just Do It.

Time Magazine. And, in fact, I see a different story almost every week about some church sponsoring a series on sex or a sex challenge of some kind. Every week.

Part of the trend involves putting up suggested billboards all around town. And those billboards tend to outrage even the secular communities. And that's one reason why this trend keeps making the news.

Secular people are angry about it. Every church seems to try to make those ads a little more sleazy than their predecessors. And, in fact, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, just last week, or just last month, rather, a secular school board informed a church that they weren't going to be allowed to use school property anymore for their church services because the school board looked at the flyer the church was putting on doors all over the community, and the school board thought the flyer advertising the pastor's series on sex was pornographic.

And when a secular school board is telling you you've crossed the line, trust me, you've crossed the line. And let's be honest. No one really thinks this kind of thing is absolutely necessary to reach our culture.

Nobody really thinks that. And I've never heard anyone try to argue that these trends are actually having a sanctifying impact in a society that's already sex-crazed to the point of gross perversion. So why is this so pervasive? Well, it's clear for one thing that there are lots of people in the evangelical movement who really do want to be at home in a corrupt culture.

And too many pastors are enthralled with the idea of being cool in the eyes of the world. And let's be really candid here. 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 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. That's a lot longer introduction than I originally intended to give.

But I want to stress that this problem is serious and widespread, and it is moving through the evangelical movement at frightening speed. As one guy said, it's really not a trend anymore, even. It's become the new norm, and that's sad.

And one more thing about contextualization. I can't leave this alone. I spoke on that subject, contextualization, last year at the Shepherds Conference.

And I just want to say this. 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 is one of the prominent lessons of our text.

Let's look at this text. In fact, 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 Titus that Titus 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 the common faith. It's not my son in the faith, *huios*, which would be a legal son who has come of age or someone who has been granted the privilege of sonship by adoption, but it's *technon*, child, which signifies a child by birth.

And the choice of that word implies, I think, a couple of things. One, that Titus was still a very young man, and combined with the adjective my genuine child according to our common faith, it suggests that Paul was the one who personally had led Titus to Christ. And so this young Gentile convert became indispensable to Paul.

And in 2 Corinthians alone, Paul refers to Titus nine times. He also mentions him twice in Galatians and once in 2 Timothy. Or is it 1 Timothy? I can't remember.

But Paul entrusted a number of important responsibilities to Titus. It is clear that he regarded Titus as much more than a pupil or a messenger boy, but Titus was a true and trusted partner in apostolic ministry. And so when Paul moved on from Crete, he left Titus there to be in charge of the churches that were being planted and to establish and to organize the leadership in those new churches on Crete.

And Paul says all of this 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, verses 10 through 16. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, the Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. And Paul says, this testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth, 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.

They profess to know God, but they deny Him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work. Now, there's a bit of cultural sensitivity for you, right? Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.

Their mouths need to be stopped. They're unfit for any good work. 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, hey, Cretans are liars and lazy gluttons, so reach out to them on that basis.

You know, immerse yourself in the culture and learn to speak that language and appeal to their love of food and wine and fellowship. You know, organize your men's ministry so that you meet in the pub. Harness their passion for ultimate fighting by hanging out with gladiators and imitating their lifestyle and their language and their values.

Let the flavor of that culture season your preaching. Contextualize. You won't find that in Paul's instructions to Titus.

And notice this too. Paul does not lower the bar of Christian leadership to accommodate the hedonistic bent of Cretan culture. In verses 6 through 9, he gives Titus practically the same list of qualifications for church leadership he gave Timothy in 1 Timothy 3. Now frankly, I don't envy the task Titus was called to do.

Verse 5, put in order what remains and appoint elders in every town. How do you meet those standards for leaders if all you have to work with are fresh converts out of a corrupt culture? But Titus' task was clear. He was not to ape the fashions of that society.

He was to teach them to be different. And 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 to anything they'd 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 is the whole point of our text. Chapter 2, verse 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. And notice the flow of logic in chapter 2. This is significant. Paul is listing things that adorn sound doctrine.

He's reminding Titus of several important practical and behavioral issues that are in accord with sound doctrine. Doctrine is vital, yes. You never hear me say otherwise.

Some doctrines are essential, right? That's the premise of Together for the Gospel, the Gospel Coalition, the Shepherd's Fellowship, and other similarly minded groups. Doctrine is paramount, sound doctrine, and

particularly on these essential things. We may not agree with 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 Christian fellowship. So doctrine, per se, is not extraneous or superfluous, despite what some of our postmodern friends are trying to tell us. Some truths are vital, especially the rich tapestry of truth that is at the heart of the gospel.

Some truths are so vital that if you deny them or try to alter them in any way, you are anathema, accursed. And some lies are so dangerous that, as Paul says back in chapter 1, verse 11, the mouths of those who utter those lies must be stopped. But get this.

There are likewise certain principles of sanctification and personal conduct that are so vital we are required to break fellowship with those who ignore them. Listen to 1 Corinthians 5.11. Paul says, If he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler, don't even eat with such a one. In other words, if someone calls himself a Christian, it's one thing, as Jesus did, to associate, affiliate, and be friends even with unbelievers and unsaved people, but if someone calls himself a Christian and his lifestyle or his language is chronically incompatible with a sanctified heart and mind, and 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. It's essential. It's one thing to acknowledge that the gospel is essential.

We need to acknowledge that, to a certain degree, some of the aspects of sanctification are absolutely essential, to a very large degree, I would say. And Paul's point here is that you may verbally affirm the finest confession of faith ever written, but if your words and your deeds deny it, Paul wouldn't have affirmed you as an authentic Christian at all, much less would he lay hands on you for ministry. And he says so right there in chapter 1, verses 15 and 16.

That's the whole point of those verses. Those who are defiled and unbelieving, to them, nothing is pure. Both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

It sounds to me like he's describing some guys who are actually in the pulpits today. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Paul's saying sound doctrine is essential, but it's not enough. And therefore, Paul says to Titus, chapter 2, verse 1, as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. Teach the sanctifying principles that go hand in hand with sound doctrine.

Teach the principles of sanctification that adorn the doctrine you teach. It's not a complex idea. 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 their behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They're to teach what is good and so to train the younger women. Now notice, he's 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 a grunge-addicted society like Crete. And Paul then goes systematically through all the classifications of

saints, every Sunday school class, starting with the older men, the older women, and the older women are expressly tasked then with teaching the younger women. And then in verse 6, Paul gets to the category to which Titus himself belonged, younger men.

And notice not only what Titus is to stress with them, but how he is to stress it, verses 6 through 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 is 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.

And there is nothing here whatsoever 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 does mean in 1 Corinthians 9.22, where he speaks of becoming all things to all men that he might by all means save some. The context there in 1 Corinthians 9 is just as clear as the context here. And Paul is talking about two different things.

In 1 Corinthians 9, he's talking about avoiding unnecessary stumbling blocks that get in the way of people hearing the gospel, customs and things like that. And he's saying, basically, that the gospel itself is already enough of a stumbling block. He wasn't the least bit concerned about adjusting the gospel to eliminate the offense of the gospel, or tweaking the message to suit the tastes of some subculture, or even making himself cool and stylish.

That wasn't Paul's concern. That's not why he's talking about being all things to all men. 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, and get this, he respected every culture's taboos as much as possible. His point here isn't that he joined up with those in the culture who were challenging the taboos.

He was absolutely not saying that he was willing to adopt any and every aspect of a particular subculture or lifestyle just so that he fit in, and they thought he was cool. And in fact, here, in Titus, he more or less instructs Titus not to imitate the dominant features of that culture. Notice how the twin themes of reverence and dignity run through this whole passage.

Paul does not suggest that we can tolerate a lack of dignity or a greater measure of irreverence from the young men just because they may not be fully mature yet. Dignity, notice, is expressly required of both young and old, even in that undignified culture. And in fact, that was totally counterculture.

Remember, chapter 1, verses 12 through 16, Paul basically was saying that the central problem with all of Cretan culture was that people were undignified, irreverent, self-indulgent slobs, you know, liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons. And he doesn't say that's a cultural reality that Titus needed to learn to indulge. He doesn't tell Titus to, you know, get creative and learn to adapt your strategy to fit the young people in Crete.

And Paul clearly recognized that Crete's cultural tendency was to favor the things of the flesh, but Paul was not in favor of making that tendency part of the ambiance of the churches he was planting on Crete. Just the opposite. I mean, does anyone seriously think Paul would have approved of an inflatable phallus

advertising, you know, some porn ministry in a culture like Crete? Instead, Paul says, chapter 1, verse 13, And then he 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. Verses 6 and 7, Now there's a lot in those two verses that time is not going to permit us to unpack, but I do want you to 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 every pastor's duty. And in fact, Paul words these instructions so that actually, as you analyze his language, those categories are interwoven deliberately. 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, and that gives the unfortunate impression that Paul is differentiating between those two things. But he doesn't.

In fact, that's part of the whole point of this extended passage. He's saying that sound doctrine is simply a prominent feature of good works. And vice versa is true as well.

The NAS gets the gist of it as well as any. It says, show yourself to be an example of good deeds with purity in doctrine. Your pure doctrine is one of the ways you exhibit good deeds.

And in fact, keeping your doctrine pure is one of the good deeds you're supposed 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 am 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 you contextualize the message as long as you basically get the theological facts and the doctrinal formula of the message right. And 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 is not really pure 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 chapter 1, starting in verse 15. Those whose minds and consciences are defiled profess to know God. They deny Him by their works.

They are detestable. They are unfit. He's saying they should step down.

And so if you consider Paul's command here about sound speech that cannot be condemned in the full context, look at it in the context of what Paul is saying here, he is putting a very high premium on the importance of dignity, reverence, purity, and soundness of language. And that would apply especially to the language we use in the pulpit. But here's what's vital.

Paul is 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 that would give the enemies of the gospel a legitimate reason to speak evil about us. Now, of course, throughout the New Testament we are reminded, we are told, that the world will speak evil of us.

That's going to happen. Paul isn't suggesting here that we ought to adopt some artificial postmodern notion of civility and do everything we can to be polite and politically correct all the time so that people will always like us. Quite the opposite.

He's saying, look, don't give the world any reason to criticize that are unrelated to the fact that they reject the truth we stand for. That's all they need to criticize us. Don't give them any other ammunition.

Brethren, this is not a complex issue at all. Crass, carnal, crude, gutter language, and fleshly, self-indulgent, erotic subject matter should not be the hallmarks of our ministry style. And again, less than a decade ago, no one even needed to make 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 actually 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. And so if you are someone who can fill your conversation or your sermons with filthy words, with coarse jesting, with carnal subject matter, and do that without a single pang of conscience, you need to 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 last place where everything holy should be dragged into the gutter.

Now this problem has reached epidemic proportions lately. As I said earlier, it's the new norm. And 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, verse 12. It's a shame even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret.

By the way, that is a fact our culture has worked hard to overthrow. The world thinks everything, no matter how shameful, needs to be brought out and put on display and dissected and explored openly, even in mixed audiences. That is the idea that underlies most of our culture's entertainment.

And the last thing the church should do is pretend that the world has a valid point, that that has something to do with authenticity. Preachers do not 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 should avoid.

One is what the Bible calls foolish and filthy talk, coarse, obscene, smutty words that usually make reference to private bodily functions or whatever. 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. And Scripture is not silent about any of those 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. I shall not take the Lord's name in vain. And pay careful attention to all the things Scripture teaches as a misuse of the Lord's name.

And once you understand what the Bible says about flippant irreverence, if you're not compelled to eliminate every trace of joking about sacred things, you must have a heart of stone. But, and don't miss this point, we are 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.

And Scripture gives us that command repeatedly. Colossians 3 brings both the negative and the 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. And then verses 16 and 17 are positive. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another, 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 be always gracious, seasoned.

Or in 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. And in negative terms, listen to the first part of Ephesians 4, 29, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth. And a few verses later, Ephesians 5, 4, let there be no filthiness, nor foolish talk, nor crude joking, which are all out of place.

Last fall, I think one Sunday when John was gone, I did a sermon from this pulpit on Ephesians 5, verses 1 through 4. And I dealt in careful detail with that text and what it means. You can download that message for free if you're looking for more on this subject. And in fact, while you're online, look for a sermon I did a few months before that on the third commandment.

Especially if you aren't clear about how far-reaching the implications of that commandment are. But this morning, we have time only to get a quick overview. And I want to look at that verse I just read, Ephesians 5, 4, because it really defines what sound speech is in our text.

Paul here 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 meaning obscenity or indecency or impurity.

And in fact, in English, filthiness is a perfect translation. It refers to language that has overtones of moral defilement. It refers to the jargon that the porn industry would epitomize.

That would epitomize the kind of thing that this applies to. You know, it literally means dirty words. The stuff your mom probably threatened to wash your mouth out with soap for.

And Paul doesn't give a list of those words. Postmodernists love to point that out. Well, there's no list of those words.

Of course not. There certainly wouldn't be a list in English. Most of those words weren't invented then.

But he didn't even give a list in Greek. Why? Because he didn't need to. Every culture has an unwritten list of dirty words.

And everyone pretty much knows the rules. We know what those words are. If you seriously have no clue what they are, ask any schoolboy.

They are the same words that affect the MPAA ratings on movies. They are the calling cards of carnal conversation, and that's why we're not to use them. Notice, Paul doesn't say, avoid words like that as much as you possibly can.

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. And the second word in Ephesians 5.4 is morologia.

Morologia means basically buffoonery. It's from the same Greek word as moron. And it refers to stupid, silly talk.

And the context makes it clear that what Paul has in mind is the kind of moronic wordplay that characterizes so much of worldly conversation today, just like it did in Paul's time. Wordplay peppered with vile words, spicy subjects, lewd and erotic themes. That's what he's talking about, because you can tell the larger context here is all about sexual purity.

So he's describing that sort of sophomoric banter that's always filled with sexual innuendo. Don't do that, he says. It's not fitting for a saint.

And then the third expression he uses here in Ephesians 5.4 is eutrapoleia, which means crude joking, or that's the way it's translated. In this context, that's pretty self-explanatory. Crude joking.

Dirty jokes. There's an interesting fact about this word, though. In secular Greek literature, this word was used almost always in an entirely positive sense.

It basically meant cleverness. And the Greek expression comes from a word that literally, you break it down, it means well-turned. It evokes the idea of flexibility or versatility, and it basically refers to someone who is quick-witted.

He can turn a phrase really quickly. And more specifically, it describes someone who is witty in a risqué or off-color sense, you know? Crude joking is exactly the idea. And Greek culture admired that trait, just like our culture today does.

Listen to any of the most famous comedians. That's what they do. But Scripture emphatically condemns it.

And in Christian literature, this word was always used to denote something negative. This is not some Victorian notion that was invented 150 years ago. Christians have always had this standard.

And Paul here has carefully chosen three expressions that pretty much cover all kinds of dirty words, filthy jokes, suggestive wordplay, erotic subject matter, filthy double entendre, everything that is bawdy, tasteless, or inappropriate in polite company. And notice, those are the very things that modern 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.

So whose strategy should we pursue? It's really not a hard question, is it? Someone says, yeah, but Paul himself used the word skubalon, and that means dung or excrement. Actually, that word had an interesting range of semantic possibilities. And the way it was used in secular Greek literature explodes the myth that that word was considered taboo.

It wasn't. 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 I'll be honest with you, I think it's undoubtedly true that when Paul used this word in Philippians 3, he 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 know what? You don't need to use Saxon four-letter words in order to convey Paul's idea clearly. And 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 is exactly what Paul intended.

And in fact, the only other instance, I can only think about one other, where you find coarse language in the Apostle Paul, the one people always point out, is Galatians 5.12, where Paul was answering the Judaizers. And you know, they insisted that uncircumcised Gentiles, like Titus, couldn't be saved unless they submitted to the ritual removal of their foreskins. And Paul took the logic of their doctrine and turned it against them.

He said, if salvation can literally be gained through cutting off some flesh, why not go further? If circumcision is efficacious for justification, just think what castration could do for them. It's a great argument, really. And you know what? It is 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 was using there 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 it's forceful. This is perhaps the single most shocking thing Paul says anywhere.

But he used no vile expressions. Break it down. There's no dirty words here.

He wasn't being profane or obscene. And it is grotesque imagery, the self-mutilation of someone who makes himself a eunuch. It's grotesque.

But this wasn't a foreign idea he injected into an unrelated subject so that he could turn the subject to something crude just to be cool. This point was totally germane to the rational argument he was making. It was not merely a vulgar insult thrown in for crudeness' sake.

It came at the end of four and a half chapters in which Paul had carefully and systematically dismantled the Judaizers' doctrine. And earthy sarcasm like this certainly never became the defining element in Paul's style of polemical discourse. It's disingenuous to suggest that.

Paul has never been nicknamed the cussing apostle. And furthermore, there is a significant difference between strong language and obscene talk. The two are not the same.

Strong language is definitely needed more, certainly 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. Well, 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. And if you go to Wittenberg today, at the door to the library there, there's a book of cartoons by Luther's friend, Kroenig, the artist. And Luther and Kroenig, I think, worked together to make these cartoons, so this reflects Luther's mindset.

And it is displayed under glass there at the entrance to the library, and for several years it has been permanently open to a page showing a cartoon of some reformer defecating in the Pope's mitre, this hat that the Pope wears. Luther was notorious for his ability to be crude like that, especially in his conversation with students. But I don't know of any evidence that suggests he ever brought scatological language into the pulpit in the first place.

And if you think Luther's use of vulgar insults against the Pope was 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 and look for Luther's exchange with Sir Thomas More, the letters back and forth that they wrote.

It is appalling in the extreme. It's 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.

He didn't do anybody any good. Deliberately vulgar language and purposely erotic themes have never been helpful tools for the spread of the gospel. No wonder.

Because if you are cultivating that style of conversation, you are being disobedient to what Scripture commands. Well, what about the Song of Solomon? That's the other excuse everybody always uses. That's another aspect of the argument that's being set forth, especially 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, euphemistic expressions that are suitable for reading in any audience. It's the opposite of what these guys today are doing. The current fad is just the opposite of what's modeled for us in the Song of Solomon.

The stuff you hear today is nothing but soft porn smuggled into the church under the guise of relevance. But you know what? It's counter-relevant and counterproductive because 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, and when the New York Times and CNN and ABC and all the major secular news media are doing feature articles focusing on the raunchy language of one of evangelicalism's best-known preachers, we have got a serious problem.

My dear mom, who taught me some of these principles through the judicious use of a bar of soap, she 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. And so she lived with chronic weakness for 45 years.

And her motto was a Bible verse. Ecclesiastes 9, verse 10. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.

She didn't have a lot of might, but that verse meant a lot to her. She kept a cross-stitched version of that verse as a reminder. Three times in the five weeks since my mom died, twice on national television news broadcasts, two separate interviews on large secular network programs, I have heard Mark Driscoll make a filthy, sophomoric joke about a certain sexual behavior and that verse is his punchline.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. And 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 too.

Driscoll uses it as a throwaway line for a cheap laugh whenever the conversation turns to sex. He says, these are his words, he wants to bring a breath of comedy and hipness to what can be an otherwise dull religious discussion. That is not at all what the Apostle Paul was doing when he used the word scubalon or when he sarcastically condemned the Judaizers.

That sort of joke is a blatant misuse of the word of God. And frankly, I don't think anyone could have told a joke like that in an evangelical context just a decade ago without eliciting a gasp of horror from Christians. But every time I hear Driscoll tell that joke, the response these days is raucous laughter.

That kind of smutty humor featuring sacred things has become all the rage among evangelicals. The sad thing is I will probably never hear that verse again without thinking of Driscoll's smutty joke. And that is exactly what I'm talking about when I suggest that it is dangerously easy for body talk and filthy jokes to cross the line into rank blasphemy.

There's no other word for that. Look up blasphemy in your dictionary, you'll see. In fact, I am 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 as an obscene joke is a far worse defilement of what is holy than the sin of those who put the Ark of God on an ox cart. Now my time is gone. And I need to wrap this 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 that you have targeted might be.

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 in every subculture. Unclean lips are a disqualifying factor. That's one of the incidental points of Isaiah 6, isn't it? Isaiah cursed himself and tried to hide saying, Woe is me for I am lost for I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people they have unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

And when God called Isaiah to be a prophet, the first thing that happened was an angel cleansed those filthy lips with a hot coal off the altar. There is nothing truly prophetic about a trash mouth. And again, that's just one of the secondary issues of Isaiah 6. The central lesson of Isaiah 6 is what we sang earlier.

Holy, holy, holy God is. Our lives and our lips must reflect that.

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