

"A People of Unclean Lips"

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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:1-8)

When Isaiah is first called as a prophet of the Lord, he is shown a dazzling vision of the throne room of God. The God on the throne is very big — the hem of his robe fills the room. The entire structure is full of smoke. Heavenly attendants swirl around the Lord, each of them chanting the main idea of this whole vision, as if Isaiah would ever miss it: "Holy, Holy, Holy." Confronted with this powerful display of the holiness of God, Isaiah's first reaction is to realize that he is in big, big trouble. "Woe is me!" he says. "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." A very human Isaiah knows he has no business being that close to the divine presence of God.

He was not the only one to get that message. When a young Moses saw the burning bush, and turned aside to check it out, the Lord called out with a clear warning. "Moses, Moses! ... Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."¹ Later, when a more experienced Moses asked the Lord to reveal the divine glory to him, the Lord knew the prophet couldn't withstand the fullness of that power. "You cannot see my face," God said, "for no one shall see me and live." So God tucked Moses away in the cleft of a rock, and covered Moses with the divine hand as the glory of the Lord passed by.² The Bible makes it very clear that the purity, the righteousness, and the holiness of God is dangerous to any impurity or lack of righteousness that may come into its presence.

As persons who were called to speak the words of God, the prophets were particularly concerned with the purity of their speech. Isaiah is the best example of this. By saying that his lips were unclean, he knew that they were defiled, dirty, and impure. Even if he were the most moral man around, Isaiah sensed that he was still completely unworthy. And so it is for all of us who are honest about who we are and how our own feeble attempts at holiness stack up against the holiness of God. Even someone like John Wesley, who strove for piety his entire life, admitted "I am an unclean branch of an unclean tree."³

¹ Exodus 3:4-5.

² Exodus 33:20-23.

³ John Wesley, Notes on the Bible, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.ii.xxiv.vii.ii.html>.



OK, true confession time. How many of you are willing to admit that, at some point in your lives, you have gotten your mouths washed out with soap? That never happened to me, but only because my punishment ended up being something different. Do any of you remember Mad Libs, that game where stories have blanks left in them for certain words, and one person blindly and randomly fills in those blanks with a noun or verb or adjective or whatever? When I was in 5th grade, my friend Sam and I thought it would be really fun to complete a Mad Libs story with the foulest words we knew. We were just coming into that age when you begin learning those words, and what we came up with was truly filthy. We had an absolute blast. But we also knew that we needed to destroy the evidence quickly, because the words we used were completely taboo. So we ripped out the page and threw it in the trash. Shortly thereafter, unbeknownst to us, a girl in my class who had figured out what our clandestine enterprise was all about, and who shall remain nameless, went to the trash can, fished out our illicit story, and presented it to our teacher as "Exhibit A" in her case that Peter and Sam were horrible people who needed to be destroyed. The rest of my day was an exercise in pain, beginning with a trip to the principal's office, and ending with that fateful moment when my dad came home from work.

So, I never got the mouthful of soap treatment, but I got what was coming to me. My guess is that Isaiah would have taken any of these options over what he got. A block of Irish Spring on the tongue would have been welcome, given what the angels did to him. Isaiah's unclean lips would be purified with fire, the wound of his impurity cleansed and cauterized with searing heat. But this seems much closer to what we need today. Soap doesn't seem to be enough. Like John Wesley, like all of you, I am still "an unclean branch of an unclean tree." We are still a people of unclean lips.

And, it seems we are getting dirtier all the time. Just a few years before his death, Associate Justice Antonin Scalia said "One of the things that upsets me about modern society is the coarseness of manners. You can't go to a movie — or watch a television show for that matter — without hearing the constant use" of a particular word that I will not utter from this pulpit.⁴ One recent study, for example, has looked at books in print to measure the use of the seven words that George Carlin famously said couldn't be spoken on TV back in 1972. The study found that one of the worst of those words was 678 times more likely to be used in print today than it was in 1950. My guess is that the numbers for movies and TV might be even worse. And the same would go for the political arena, where officials seem to have abandoned any attempt at maintaining a verbal filter. It is shocking what kind of language we, as a society, have come to tolerate, or even praise.

Given my history with Mad Libs, I am in no position to be prudish or mount a high horse over any of this. In fact, there are some who would say that this trend toward coarser language is not that big a deal. The linguistic scholar Benjamin Bergen, for example, thinks that the increase in public profanity is basically harmless, that much of it can be dismissed as lighthearted fun.⁵ It's like that time many years ago when the daughter of the pastor stubbed her toe and yelled out "Darn!" Her father heard it and didn't like it one bit. "I'll give you ten cents," he said, "if you'll never say that word again." She took the deal. A few days

⁴ Jean M. Twenge, et al. "The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television: Increases in the Use of Swear Words in American Books, 1950-2008," <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2158244017723689>, p. 1.

⁵ Benjamin K. Bergen, *What the F: What Swearing Reveals About Our Language, Our Brains, and Ourselves* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 223.

later she came home and found her father in his study. “Daddy,” she said, “I heard a word today that’s got to be worth at least a dollar.”⁶ There may be a part of us that just wants to chuckle about this stuff and move on.

Some scientists have even found some positive effects of profanity. In one study, people who were asked to hold their hands in a bucket of ice water for as long as they could stand it, people who were allowed to swear had a greater tolerance for pain, and held their hands in longer, than those who were not.⁷ The rise in swearing has also been linked to the rise of individualism in our culture, since as a mode of self-expression it attracts attention and elicits strong reactions.⁸ The “shock value” of cursing may help to explain why some people actually seem to be responding favorably to public outbursts of profanity.

However, as believers in the Word of God, there is just too much ancient wisdom to accept that a foul mouth can be a good thing for a person of faith. There is an ancient story of a Greek philosopher who asked his servant to prepare him the best dish possible. The servant prepared a meal of tongue, saying: “It is the best of all dishes, because with it we may bless and communicate happiness, dispel sorrow, remove despair, cheer the fainthearted, inspire the discouraged, and say a hundred other things to uplift mankind.”

Later on, the philosopher decided to ask the same servant to think about the worst dish he could imagine. “It would be the same dish,” the servant replied. “Tongue is the worst, because with it we may curse and break human hearts; destroy reputations; promote discord and strife; set families, communities and nations at war with each other.”⁹

The book of James expresses this same sentiment. “[T]he tongue, it says, “is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”¹⁰

The word “profanity,” as it turns out, actually derives from the idea that crude and demeaning language is at odds with faith. In Latin, the word *profanus* literally means “outside the temple.”¹¹ It is language that desecrates the holy — words that particularly offend the purity and righteousness of God.

And no speech is farther outside of the temple than words that demean or negatively label groups of people. We call them “slurs,” the words that society deems most offensive and off-limits. Even those linguists who are most tolerant of profanity say that this kind of language is different. “Not all profanity is equal,” Bergen says, “and all signs point to a strengthening in the United States of one specific class of profane language, namely, slurs.”¹² This increase, he says, is neither healthy nor helpful. These are the kinds of words that do the greatest harm to children, to vulnerable people, and even to the souls of the people who utter them.

In this respect, we are all called to follow the pattern of Isaiah. It’s not just Hebrew prophets who are called to lives of holiness. It’s not just ancient writers who are called to

⁶ Everybody’s magazine, Volume XXII, January to June, 1910, <https://books.google.com/books>, p. 573.

⁷ Bergen, p. 223-4.

⁸ Twenge, p. 2.

⁹ <https://odb.org/2003/02/07/whos-got-your-tongue/>

¹⁰ James 3:6-8.

¹¹ Bergen, p. 17.

¹² Bergen, p. 225.

share the sacred words of God. All of us are, you and me. Standing in the presence of the God who not only saves us but calls us, who not only gives generously to us but also expects something of us in return, we have to be just as honest as the prophet was. I will confess it. You and I are men and women of unclean lips, and we all live among a people of unclean lips." As people of faith, we cannot allow crude and demeaning talk to be normalized. We cannot tolerate it in ourselves or in anyone else who speaks for us, because it is not OK.

But don't take my word for it, because I am but a man of unclean lips. Let the Words of God speak for themselves...

- Proverbs 18:21 — *"Death and life are in the power of the tongue..."*
- Proverbs 12:18 — *"Rash words are like thrusts of the sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."*
- Proverbs 15:1-4 — *"A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly... A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit."*
- Colossians 3:8 — *"[N]ow you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth."*
- Ephesians 4:29 — *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."*
- The words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount — *"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."*
- And the words of the Spirit from Philippians 4 — *"[B]eloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."*

In the presence of the holy God who will not and cannot be polluted or profaned, Isaiah knew he could not stand. *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."* Then one of the angels around the throne picked up a pair of tongs and drew a burning coal from the flames of the altar. Touching the coal to those unclean lips, the seraph said *"Your guilt has departed... your sin is blotted out."* Then the voice of the Lord boomed from the throne, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* And the newly cleansed mouth of Isaiah answered the call: *"Here am I; send me!"*

Lord, may the cleansing fire of your Spirit purify the mouths of us, your people of unclean lips, that we too may be vessels of your holiness. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**