



VULGARITY, ABUSIVE SPEECH & BLASPHEMY IN PAUL'S LETTERS by Greg Johnson

Our modern English term *profanity* covers several distinct biblical categories of speech. Princeton defines *profanity* as “vulgar or irreverent speech or action.” However, within the Bible’s world of discourse, vulgarity and irreverence are themselves distinct categories, as is a third category—abusive speech.

1. **VULGARITY:** speech “of the common people,” “coarseness,” “the quality of lacking taste and refinement.” Within any culture, a range of terms may be used to describe the same thing. Some of those terms may be preferred among higher social classes (*defecation*), while others may be the domain of the common people (*crap, et al*). Speech used primarily by lower classes is vulgarity. In a rare moment in which the Bible’s standard is looser than that of the FCC, no biblical text prohibits vulgarity. Rather, the use of vulgar terminology only becomes sinful when used in an abusive or blasphemous manner (see below) or when it becomes a poor witness in a given cultural context.

2. **ABUSIVE SPEECH:** speech intended to harm or shame another person. This may involve slander, angry words, gossip, words that tempt another to sin (through temptation or innuendo), or humor that comes at another person’s expense. Abusive speech is communication that violates the second greatest commandment: love of neighbor.

COLOSSIANS 3:8: “But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and *abusive speech* [αἰσχρολογία = *abusive speech or speech that shames one’s opponent in Polybius and Plato, but used only here in the NT*] from your mouth” (NASB).

Given that communication’s purpose is to speak love and life into one another, only speech that edifies others can fulfill God’s design for communication. By extension, then, any word that does not tend in the direction of encouragement is useless.

EPHESIANS 4:28-29: “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. Let no *unwholesome* [σαπρὸς = *rotten, putrid, diseased or useless*] word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear” (NASB).

In Ephesians 5, Paul speaks both to the direct abusiveness of humor at another’s expense and to the kind of meaningless levity that refuses to take life seriously.

EPHESIANS 5:3-6: “But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness [αἰσχροτης = *ugliness, disgrace, filth*] and *silly talk* [μωρολογία = *levity, foolish chatter or “cultured insolence” to Aristotle, classified somewhere between buffoonery and boorishness*], or *coarse jesting* [ευτραπεία = *jesting, wittiness, here used of the double entendre, disguising insult with speech that could have another meaning*], which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (NASB).

3. **BLASPHEMY:** speech “expressing disrespect for God or for something sacred,” “defamation of the name of God,” “words that are spoken against God.” Blasphemy is verbalized irreverence and is directly prohibited by the third commandment. Such speech violates the greatest commandment: love of God. In 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul describes how he handed Hymenaeus and Alexander over to Satan “to be taught not to blaspheme.”