What Does the Bible Say about Foul Language?

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Introduction:

"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless," James tells us (**James 1:26**, ESV). But what does a bridled tongue sound like. What does the Bible actually tell us about foul language? What words are we allowed to say or not allowed to say? I have some fear about this lesson. First, because it is hard to speak on this subject clearly without crossing the very bounds of propriety I'm trying to preserve. Second, since what I will say is not going to coincide with the traditional lessons on this topic, I fear some of you will be upset with me. However, I am 100% convinced what I am going to tell you is the truth. As I have always said, I don't believe I have all the answers but I do believe the Bible does. If, when I am done, you think I have missed the boat on something, I would be happy to learn from you what you believe the Bible teaches.

Discussion:

I. What the Bible doesn't say.
   A. In the 1980s, George Carlin became famous for his very vulgar skit about the 8 words not allowed on television. I wish this lesson was that simple. I wish I could turn you to a passage that gave us the list of bad words. But I can't. There just isn't one.
   B. We have often heard preachers go to **Matthew 26:74** where it says Peter began to curse and swear to speak against bad words today. However, in the first place, this text is not talking about cussing in the sense of bad words as we usually mean it. Rather, it means he either cursed the people he was talking to or himself. That is, not that he used "curse words," but that he uttered curses against them. And then he swore, that is, he called on the name of God to take an oath that he was not one of the apostles. But even if this was a passage that referred to bad words, it doesn't tell us what they would be.
   C. The fact is there is not one single verse that provides us any teaching that declares that any particular word is inherently bad. In fact, strictly speaking, there is no biblical concept of bad words. Don't misunderstand; the Bible does speak of corrupt speech, what we might call using words badly. However, there is no decree from God that lists even one single word as bad simply because the word is bad. We need to be honest;when we tell someone a certain word is bad, we are not doing so because God has defined that word as bad. We are doing so either because we have decided that word in our culture violates some principles of God's Word or because our society and culture has determined the word is bad.

II. What the Bible does say.
   A. While the Bible does not give us a list of words to avoid, it does provide principles to guide our speech. I will share those principles with you and let you be the judge of what words you should and should not say.
   B. *Principle #1*: *No corrupting talk* (**Ephesians 4:29**)—Instead of words that tear down, we are supposed to use words that build up. The building up here does not refer solely to spiritual edification. This doesn't provide a list of words to remove from our speech. But it does point out that belittling speech, shaming speech, berating speech, name-calling, and other forms of speech that tear people down rather than build them up is foul in the Christian's mouth.
   C. *Principle #2: No careless words* (**Matthew 12:36-37**)—This statement is somewhat difficult to nail down. But the word here means idle or lazy. I think the ESV gets the heart of its meaning when it says "careless." That is, no matter what we say, if we are speaking lazily, that is without careful consideration and thought, we will be judged for it. We could say "thoughtless speech." Have you ever been in an argument and had to back up and say, "I didn't mean that, it just came out." That is speaking without thinking, without care. Jesus tells us not to do it.
   D. *Principle #3: No irreverent or profane words* (**I Timothy 4:7; 6:20; II Timothy 2:16**)—Where the ESV says "irreverent," other translations say "profane." In our day "profanity" has come to encompass all "bad words." But profanity in the biblical sense actually means to treat the holy in a low, base, light, and irreverent manner. This includes taking the Lord's name in vain. But it goes beyond that. Should we speak of the holy heaven in such a light manner as those do when they say, "For heaven's sake" or "My heavens"? We should not treat lightly the holy teachings of Christ as some do when they joke about the Lord's words.

E. *Principle #4: No cursing* (**Romans 12:14; James 3:9-10**)—This is not about "cussing," but rather calling curses down upon men. No doubt, we are allowed to warn of God's curses on men, but it is not our job to curse men. When we say things like "damn you" or "go to hell" we are cursing men. That shouldn't come from our mouths. However, this is not merely limited to those magic words that have been deemed curse words by our society. If we cursed a man saying "a pox upon you" as was popular in past centuries, we would be violating this principle.

F. *Principle #5: No filthy, foolish, or crude speaking* (**Ephesians 5:4**)—For the longest time, I tried to figure out the difference in the three terms used here. However, in the context of **Ephesians 5:3, 5, 11-12**, I am convinced Paul is not telling us about three different bad forms of speech but rather emphasizing one point by using parallelism. He is talking about the light and crude discussion of sinful activities, especially of sexual immorality. This is not simply talking about some words for sex our society deems base and vulgar, though it would include them. It also cautions us against speaking of immorality as if it is a joke or joking about it. It forbids what we would call dirty jokes as well.

G. *Principle #6: No malicious words* (**Ephesians 4:31**)—We must not speak words that intend to harm, either to someone's face or behind their back. Let me make a point here. In our society, we are told the word for female dog is bad. And when using it as a derogatory attack on someone, it most definitely is. But for some reason, the word for female horse or female cow is okay. But is calling someone a nag or heifer any less malicious than the word we have declared bad?

H. *Principle #7: Speak honorably in the sight of men* (**II Corinthians 8:20-21**)—This point is somewhat different than the others, but no less important. The passage we are reading is not talking about speech. It is talking about the use of money. However, please note the important principle that we want to do what is honorable not merely before God, but also before men. We do not want to leave ourselves open to accusations from men. We are not allowed to merely say that what others think is unimportant. If our society has declared that a word or phrase is bad, we should not use it because we leave ourselves open to an accusation from men. Rather, we need to speak in a way that will be deemed honorable among men.

III. A few comments about euphemisms.
    A. According to <u>Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language</u>, a euphemism is "the substitution of a mild, indirect, or vague expression for one thought to be offensively harsh or blunt." Since I became a Christian, I have heard numerous things about euphemisms ranging from "Christians should never, ever use euphemisms because that is just as bad as really cussing" to "what's the big deal about euphemisms, Christians don't have to worry about those at all." I think both extremes are mistaken. I will make three comments about euphemisms and, as before, allow you to make the applications you deem fit.
    B. *We cannot make blanket statements against euphemisms*. Sadly, the statements that sweep with too broad a brush, discarding "euphemisms" as wholly sinful simply demonstrate ignorance about what a euphemism is. The fact is the Bible uses euphemisms. For instance, in **I Samuel 24:3** when the ESV says Saul went in to relieve himself and the KJV says "cover his feet," the Bible used a euphemistic phrase to avoid saying that Saul was defecating. Further, even those who have made such blanket rebukes of "euphemisms" use them and would laud their use at times. Have you ever heard someone say, "he used a *four-letter-word*"? "Four-letter-word" is a euphemism so the person relating the story can avoid actually saying the word and we with sensitive ears appreciate that euphemism. Finally, if we are going to make a blanket statement against any and all words described as euphemisms, we are going to be in some real trouble. According to The Online Etymology Dictionary (etymonline.com) the words "assemble" and "fellowship" were viewed for several centuries as euphemisms for sexual intercourse.
    C. *However, you need to consider your intent*. While we cannot make the blanket statement that anything considered a euphemism is wrong, we shouldn't take the opposite approach of saying God never said euphemisms were wrong so we don't have to worry about them. Because of our magic "bad word" mentality, we sometimes think if we chose a word society doesn't think is bad we are okay. But, we need to remember God is not as concerned with the actual words as what is intended by those words. For instance, I think each and every one of us would say I was violating the principle of "no cursing" found in **Romans 12:14** and **James 3:9-10** if I called God's damnation down upon someone. But, brothers and sisters, if instead I looked at that person and said, "Gosh darn you," was my intent any less to curse them just because I didn't use the words our society has defined as bad? Yes, we do need to take care. Using a euphemistic phrase does not change the intent of our heart and the motivation of our speech. If our motivation violates one of the principles, the words may not be considered bad, but the speech is corrupt.

D. *You need to consider the insinuation.* Euphemisms are a kind of insinuation. That is, instead of directly saying something, we are indirectly saying something. For instance, when we say someone "passed away" we are using a euphemism that means they died. We are insinuating their death. When we use euphemisms that indirectly mean or sound like "bad words" we are often insinuating those words and if nothing else leading others to think those words. If you say, "Oh my gosh" what do you think you insinuated in the minds of those who heard you? The same could be asked about words like "dang," "heck," "geez," and others. As Christians, we do need to give careful consideration to the words we use because of the insinuations we make in the minds of those who hear. I know that doesn't give us a list of bad euphemisms, but it gives us a principle I believe we need to consider as we choose our words carefully.

Conclusion:

Again, I wish this could have been as simple as here are the eight magic words you just aren't allowed to use. But God didn't give that to us. Rather, He gave us principles, and we must take care to consider them as we choose our words, phrases, jokes, and other speech. We will be judged for every thoughtless, careless, idle word we speak (**Matthew 12:36-37**), so we must think before we speak. I hope this was helpful. As I said, I know it does not coincide with everything you have probably ever heard in the traditional lesson on these topics. If you believe I missed something or did not represent accurately how the Bible answers this question, I hope you will share that with me. May God bless us as we strive to surrender our speech to Him.