
Watch Your Language!

by E. Bradley Beevers

Recently I watched the Disney movie, *Aladdin*. As a good member of the audience, I put myself in the hero's shoes. So when thinking over the movie afterward, I asked myself a question: What would I wish for if God gave me three wishes? Immediately the story of Solomon's dream came to my mind. God asked him to name what he would like, and he asked for wisdom to govern Israel. Would I, too, wish for wisdom? But, I thought, I don't have the responsibility of governing Israel as he did. Perhaps I would wish for holiness. I then dismissed the thoughts from my mind.

But several days later the "wish" idea was back. I had thought of something to wish for. I wished I could take back something I had said; a thoughtless comment, not intended in hostility, but sinful, unkind—even stupid. If you had a wish coupon at the end of the day, how many times would you turn it in to "unsay" something that came out of your mouth? There are many times you could use such a coupon. For example, you were trying to make small talk, but a stupid joke or comment came out and offended someone to whom you were speaking. You were nervous so you talked, but realized you were babbling. You were irritated at home and were sharp with your roommates, spouse, or children. Or, after making a mistake, you tried to explain; but the more you talked the worse it got. And the list could go on. How right James 3 is, "If anyone makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also!"

Scripture warns us to take our language seriously. The battle for the tongue is the battle for the Christian life. Jesus once described the judgment day as the time when men would give account "for every careless word they utter" (Matthew 12:36). Our use of language, he said, defines the difference between the saved and the unsaved. "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). Language is so important because it reveals who you are. Good trees bear good fruit, and bad trees, bad fruit. Each man brings forth what is inside; "out of the abun-

dance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). Therefore, Paul exhorts those who have put off the old man to "let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

Evil speech isn't just talking when you should be silent or saying things you immediately wish you hadn't said. Some things we say are bad for other reasons. For example, with some speech, we determine whether it is evil or good by asking when, to whom, under what circumstances, with what tone of voice something is said. At the other extreme, we distinguish "foul language" from the rest of language; "foul language" is inherently bad. It's not a matter of saying something at the wrong time or to the wrong person. Such "evil talk" is always wrong, always to be avoided by the believer.

Think about this. Foul language *is* evil, always, and Christians are right to avoid using it. But what makes it evil? It is not that it refers to things you should not talk about. It is evil because it expresses a casual, blasphemous, or perverse world view. For example, "damn" is not always a curse word; in its proper meaning it refers to a divine act. God damns the wicked to hell. When the world uses this word as a curse, however, they trivialize and mock God's judgment. Another example might be how unbelievers even seek to make "God" or "Jesus Christ" profane expressions of shock or anger.

I have deliberately chosen two examples that highlight how a perverse world view makes an expression a curse. "Damn" or "Jesus Christ" can either be curses or used in righteous ways. Most profanities and obscenities, however, are not so flexible; they are always blasphemous or perverse. The world view is "built in." The expressions themselves communicate rebellion and unbelief—not in *what* they describe but in the *interpretation* implied in the description. For example, most obscenities express hostile and/or immoral attitudes in terms based on the human body's natural functions. The *what* was created by God; the *evil interpretation* degrades and perverts what God made. There is no way such words can be rightly used; they simply must be avoided. The Scriptures recognize this perverted world view. No one speaking by the Spirit of God can say "Jesus be cursed" (I Corinthians 12:3). Other examples perhaps should not even be named, for "it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret." Christians usually recognize such vocabulary and phrasing as the expression of an unbelieving world view and rightly treat their use as sinful.

Brad Beevers leads a discipleship community and is a Ph.D. student at Westminster Theological Seminary.

But “foul” phrases are not the only expressions that are based on an unbelieving world view. Many of our common descriptions or definitions subtly agree with unbelieving ways of thinking. Like curse words, euphemisms have a world view built in. When the world calls adultery an “affair,” has it not twisted the description to eliminate any moral evaluation and indignation? And the word substituted wasn’t arbitrarily picked out of the dictionary. Adultery sounds sinful; affair almost sounds fun. The world is constantly looking for ways to make its behavior sound normal, acceptable, and right. Substituting “sleeping together” for fornication eliminates any sense of disapproval. “Sexually active” implies that restraint is passive, dull, or weak. What was once sodomy (from its first mention in Genesis 19) became “homosexuality,” then “gay,” then merely a “sexual preference” or “alternative lifestyle.” Now even moral indignation at such perversion is pejoratively labeled “homophobia.”

A Step Further

These examples are well known, and their unbiblical prejudice is obvious. Christians must (and often do) guard their speech so that they do not subtly reinforce or surrender to the world’s perspective. But go still deeper. All areas where rebellion and unbelief are expressed in language must be similarly confronted. So far I haven’t attacked anything subtle. Both profanity and “politically correct” definitions are obviously based on an anti-Christian world view. Now let’s tackle a slightly less obvious case: how people use language to minimize responsibility for their behavior. First, consider how the world speaks of obvious sins. We live in a society where excessive spending is common. Yet we rarely hear the word greed used to describe it. Such a lifestyle is merely “comfortable.” Patterns of disobedience are “problems,” not sins. Grumbling or complaining are “saying what I feel” or “being honest.” Even in the church we sometimes call speaking evil of another “sharing” or “seeking counsel,” rather than gossip or slander.

Understand what is going on here. Terms not only describe; they interpret. When we use a word such as gossip, many biblical images and exhortations come to mind—as well they should. When we try to describe the same activity in a more “neutral” fashion, what we really do is describe it in an unbiblical way. God’s descriptive categories are *not* neutral. The scientific mindset can condition us to think of neutrality as desirable. Not so. We live in a universe full of God’s voice. All that He created and over which He rules speaks to His glory. It reveals Him. “Neutrality” is really a surrender to unbelief. It is a refusal to speak and think from God’s perspective. Speaking “neutrally” is a failure to pro-

claim God’s truth to a lost world and call it to repentance. Isn’t it a proclamation of God’s truth and perspective to use the term adultery or fornication in place of more neutral language with a fellow worker? Doesn’t the term “alternative lifestyle” work to soothe his conscience and silence God’s conviction? Our speech must affirm God’s interpretation against the world’s rebellious thinking; we are not “neutral”; we are for Him. Nor are unbelievers “neutral”; they are against Him. Our speech must reflect this, so that “whether (we) eat or drink or whatever we do, we do it all for the glory of God.”

The world’s language minimizes responsibility when describing emotions and behavioral patterns. These important topics are the subject of popular attention. But as when it speaks of sexual behavior, the world changes the terms to divert attention from responsibility and sin. First, the world diverts attention from its responsibility by speaking as though the situation, rather than the person, was the actor. “It made me so angry.” “His behavior made me bitter.” “You are so irritating.” “The intense suffering took away my desire for God.” There is supposedly nothing we can do about our reactions. Since they result directly from the situation, they are really part of it. They are just there.

Second, the world diverts attention from its sin by seeking a “neutral” description of the experience. For example, Christians recognize the difference between hopelessness, disappointment, sadness, depression, guilt, fear, anger, and grief. Biblically each is distinct. Each description describes something specific, and each emotion is easily put in a moral context. The unbeliever bundles them all into a (descriptively worthless) *neutral* category such as “emotionally distressed” or “upset.” Patterns of sin which cause people to fight are “personality conflicts” (about which nothing can be done.) Habits of slavery to sinful patterns are “diseases,” (irresistible) “compulsions,” “addictions.” Such terms ignore God’s perspective on these human experiences. They make the world’s way of thinking about emotion, action, or opinion sound normal and natural. The steps away from biblical perspective are often subtle. I was just “cranky,” not really unkind or unloving or hateful. I am “discouraged”; I haven’t lost true perspective or lapsed in faith. As we can see clearly in these examples, there is no way to speak neutrally. The unbeliever by seeking to do so is really working to justify his evil behavior; so-called neutrality is a cloak for rebellion and hatred of God.

But wait a minute. We hear these examples not only in the factory or office, but in the church. We should know better. Why are they so popular? What is compelling about these terms? Let me offer a possible explana-

tion. Neutered descriptions are attractive for the unbeliever because they justify his rebellion. They make sin sound normal. Naturally this sinful dynamic has an attraction for the believer as well. It feeds fleshly desires for self-pity and self-righteousness. But there is another reason. Often situational factors, inner struggles, temptations, thoughts, wishes, longings, and experiences can be described in vivid detail. "Friday afternoon, after a rough week, my boss called me into his office. In five minutes I was fired, with only the vaguest reasons given. I hardly knew what to do. I don't even remember leaving the office. I wanted to run away; I wanted to punch him. I wanted to quit. I just sat at my desk in shock. I was really upset; of all the nerve! I spent the next three days half bummed out and half wanting to kill him. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't think of anything else. It was such a blow. I had to stop thinking about him; every time I did I would rehearse what I should have said and shake with anger." We listen to the description and we think, "Yeah; that's how it was!" The accuracy is disarming. "That person really understands what it's like." Beware! These descriptions are selectively vivid. Natural or fleshly responses are painted in great detail. Spiritual struggles are not. Vivid details are not neutral; they have a world view built in.

The description of that Friday afternoon could have been very different. "When I walked out of that office I faced the most incredible temptation toward anger that I had faced in the three years I'd worked there. I was in shock. I vaguely remember mumbling some prayer for help even as I was both reviewing what he'd said and fighting my anger. Suddenly the Scripture I had memorized came clearly to mind: 'God will with the temptation also provide the way of escape, so that you may be able to bear it.' My situation became clear to me, as if the Lord had turned on the light in a darkened room. I knew I stood at a crossroads. I could hang on to bitterness, anger, and frustration. I could run away. I could leave the job without another word to him. I could carry bitterness or hatred in my heart. Or I could do what Jesus would have done. I could be kind in return; I could return good for evil. I could pray for him. I could go back on Monday cheerfully and clean out my desk." What's the basic difference between the two descriptions? You got it. The first pretended to be neutral, while in fact it expressed the flesh's perspective. It ignored everything Christian: God's purpose, His perspective, the spiritual nature of temptation, the struggle to find hope and the right response, the solution to the problem. In the process the first description subtly justified anger and depression as natural. And from one perspective, such responses are indeed natural. But since Christ has saved us, we are no longer "the natural man" who doesn't

understand the things of the Spirit of God. Accurate description is great; spiritual struggles need to be painted in vivid detail so that our teaching is practical and reflects real life. But truly accurate description includes accurate interpretation. We need to get the whole picture right.

An Example to Work On: "I'm Bummed"

How can you start to recognize and repent of evil talk? Start with small steps. Let's take a specific example to work on. Should Christians use the term "I'm bummed?" Being "bummed" is a neutered way of expressing sadness or depression. It probably could often be translated as lacking in hope and faith, or focusing on unpleasant situations rather than on God's sovereign care, or grumbling. "I'm bummed" takes away any indication that there is a moral problem with this emotion. Most of us would be pretty surprised if a friend told us we should repent when we shared that we were "bummed out"! In the popular conception we don't get bummed because there is something wrong with us. We just are. Something's wrong with the situation; we're responding normally. That goes for all of us when we talk to people who are "bummed." We usually ask, "What happened?," more than we ask, "Why are you handling what happened that way?"

Notice some other things about this term. First, it's vague; the emotion described could be many things—depression, anger, hopelessness, sorrow, grief, resentment, conviction, self-pity. Second, the explanation for why we feel this way is inadequate. The focus is almost exclusively on the situation; no attention is given to other inward thoughts or states that lead us to be bummed. We might diagram it thus: *Situation* ➔ *Emotion*. The crucial middle term is omitted: *Situation* ➔ *Person* ➔ *Emotion*. This is neutralization again! By omitting the "person" term, it makes no difference whether the situation happens to a believer or an unbeliever; to Jesus himself or the worst sinner. Right and wrong cease to be categories that we think about. This is not nearly as true with the more specific terms listed above. When a person says he is grieving over his father's death, we know he is sad because he has experienced a loss. The reaction is good. If he said he was hopeless, depressed, or self-pitying over this death, we should have a different response! Specific terms give us crucial information about the person. We know better how to respond and bring biblical perspective. The world misses this completely. When someone is "bummed," they can offer only contentless sympathy and a powerless "hope-so" for improved circumstances. There is no hope of real life change, no way it can be better next time.

Doesn't the Bible speak of these "bummed out"

emotions with primary reference to the person, to God, to what is right, rather than simply to the situation? Notice, for example, Psalms 42 and 43. When the Psalmist is "cast down" and "disturbed," it is not because he no longer goes with the throng to the house of God. It is not because he is taunted by his enemies, by deceitful and unjust men. These things are happening. But the cause of his distress is that his soul does not hope in God. He wouldn't describe himself as "being bummed." He sees it more clearly: "Why are you downcast, O my soul?...Put your hope in God." The focus of the Psalm is that he thirsts for God as a deer longs for flowing streams.

How different is this picture from the blame-shifting and self-pitying of worldly speech! The Psalmist's vocabulary indicates that he studies his heart carefully; he figures out the true problem and looks to God for a solution. This is the goal for your own vocabulary! Your speech must not only avoid the unpleasant whining of the world but express the spiritual situation and your own responses accurately. I've done this with a very few examples above. But this is just the beginning! We need a completely Christian vocabulary; we have to act like Christians in every detail of our lives. This doesn't mean that we invent an ingrown holier-than-thou "Christianese" that makes us less accessible to the world. Our goal is rather a speech that proclaims God's truth about ourselves and His universe—a speech that avoids the world's deceitful way of speaking.

Another Example to Work On: "Because"

Because. It's such a simple word. But it expresses a lot. We use this word when we want to talk about what causes our behavior or motivates us: causality and motivation. Why did I do that? I did it *because*.... Does the Bible tell us anything about why we act the way we do? Does it teach us what causes our reactions? Sure it does. Our deeds reveal the motives of our hearts. If the thoughts and intentions of the heart are evil, then our speech and behavior will reflect it; if the heart is pure, our actions will be pure. Although this is a quick summary, all that the Bible says about causes or motives fits this structure.

Here's the point. All of our words, like all of our actions, reflect either obedience to God or disobedience. Evil speech is any speech that communicates what is false or ungodly. Words paint a world view; they express (or betray) what we functionally believe; our actions show what we believe. Luke 6:45 teaches this clearly: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks." We cannot hide; our words reveal us. Our job is to work so that our

words, like all our actions, are biblical; they apply the Bible's teaching.

Let's take an example. Bob and Sue go for a hike together. They accidentally leave one of the canteens in the car. They are on a tough trail, and it's a hot day. After about an hour and a half, they run out of water. They're going along the ridge, and there are no streams. They hike on for another hour then come to a trail marker. Bob realizes that he must have missed their turnoff 45 minutes back. Sue says, "Great. I'm really having a good time. Thanks for bringing me." Bob, a little surprised at her sarcasm, says nothing. Sue realizes what she's said and offers an explanation: "Sorry. I only said that because:

- I'm really tired. Don't let it bother you."
- that's just who I am. I can be a little short at times. It's just the way I relate. It's not a big deal."
- my family always snapped at me. I guess I've just copied them."
- I'm just having a bad day. That's what's wrong."
- it's just hard having no water, being hot, and lost. I'm just upset."
- I'm just telling you how I feel."

You can probably picture each of these responses actually occurring. But which is right? Which should you expect from a believer in this situation? Look over the list again. Which responses are okay?

The correct answer is none of them. Why? Because none offer an adequate biblical explanation for Sue's behavior. Sue snapping at Bob is wrong; it is sinful. Perhaps there are factors of her tiredness, her family background, or her relational habits. These certainly shape the specific temptations she faces. But they do not explain *why* she responded with frustration. Sue is certainly different because she's tired, hot, from a certain family, or having a "hard day." But none of these, biblically speaking, *cause* her sinful behavior. None of these tell us *why* she was unkind. Therefore, she shouldn't say, "I acted this way *because*....," and fill in reasons that are essentially excuses.

Remember, we noted the Psalmist thought about and studied his behavior. Try to be like him. Try to see Bob and Sue's situation from a believing world view. What "caused" the behavior? Remember our diagram above? *Situation* ➔ *Person* ➔ *Action* (there, an emotion; here, a behavior). The Bible teaches that Sue's behavior does not come from the situation but from the person who responds to the situation. Therefore, "why" questions aren't answered with reference to the situation; they must be answered with reference to the person. Why did Sue gripe sarcastically? It's not because she *was* hot and thirsty. It's because she didn't *want* the hassle and inconvenience of being hot and thirsty.

Let me give a simple illustration I learned as a kid in Sunday School. A person is like a sponge; the circumstances of our lives squeeze the sponge. What comes out of a sponge when you squeeze it? Well, that depends on what was in the sponge to begin with. If the sponge was soaked with ink, ink would come out; if it was soaked with water, then water would come out. So it is with the believer. If you are full of the life of Jesus, then you respond to unpleasant circumstances in Christlike ways. If you are full of worldliness and selfish cravings, then your behavior reflects this likewise. II Corinthians 4:6-18 teaches this clearly. We have the treasure of the light of God's glory that has shone in our hearts, a treasure in clay jars. Because we have an all-surpassing power from God, when we are "hard pressed," we are not crushed, despairing, or destroyed. Rather, the life of Jesus is revealed in our mortal body. We do not lose heart, though we outwardly waste away, for we are inwardly renewed every day. Our light and momentary troubles achieve an eternal weight of glory, for we look to the unseen which is eternal.

So circumstances squeeze the sponge. And ink comes out. Why? There are two possible answers: (1) because the sponge was squeezed (why ink *came out*); or (2) because ink is in the sponge (why *ink* came out). The Bible's answer to the "why" question is the second. God's interest is in why *ink* came out, rather than something else. And for a good reason! Isn't that the real question in Sue's situation? The question isn't, "Why did Sue react?" She reacted because she's a living human being! Every time you act, something is coming out. But the real question is, "Why did Sue react *that way*? Why did *that* come out?" Sue's explanations listed above are various ways of saying "ink came out because I was squeezed." The Bible's explanation is always "ink came out because ink was within." Sharp, unloving words are not caused by heat, lack of water, weariness, family background, or that Bob has gotten them lost. They are caused by an unsanctified heart.

Suffering, Behavior, and Speech

This model raises a larger biblical question. What is the relationship between difficult or painful situations (or pleasant ones) and behavior? The clearest answer is that the situation is like the scenery or backdrop in a play. It's the setting but not the action. If we're told that the scene opens in a railway station, we still know nothing of the plot! It could be frightening, joyful, or sad. This is the case with our situations. "I grew up in an abusive family" could open a story of God's faithfulness and deliverance, or it could open a story centering on self-pity and complaining. Each situation has its characteristic temptations, but the drama is acted out by the

heart. Look at Deuteronomy 8:2-6:

And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not. And He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. Your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your foot did not swell, these forty years. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in His ways and by fearing Him.

This was a hard situation! And God's purpose in making the wilderness the "setting" or the "scene" was to humble, test, and teach his people. The passage continues:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day: lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt...Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:7-14,17).

This is a different situation; completely the opposite of the first. But God's focus is still on the heart. Both sets of circumstances test His people. The tests are different. Desert hardships (e.g., Bob and Sue on the trail with no water!) squeeze us one way. Will grumbling or faith come out? The promised land (e.g., Bob and Sue back at the car with a fresh canteen) squeezes another way. Will they forget God or give thanks? The issue is always

whether or not God's people will respond righteously or sinfully. That's what God talks about. The situation is the backdrop; His interest is the drama. He wants to know whether or not the person will respond rightly.

Let's look at another biblical commentary on this time in Israel's life—I Corinthians 10:1-13:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

There are profound lessons here. Think about this situation! Put yourself in Israel's position. How would you respond if you had only one set of clothes (which never wore out!), no permanent shelter, uncertainty about the future, heat, sand, danger from warring neighbors, often no water, and never any variation in the diet or schedule? This is tough! We might expect struggles with discontent. At least we might feel inclined to give a person who did complain some understanding. Can you imagine what a small group prayer meeting might have shared about in the wilderness? They had just started to settle down and get their tents comfortably arranged. Then the cloud moved suddenly, and everything had to come up! That's hard.

But what is God's focus in the commentary in I Corinthians? He completely ignores the "mitigating circumstances." He sees only their complaining, putting Him to the test, indulging in immorality, desiring evil, and idolatry. He doesn't even mention the difficulties

they faced. And for a good reason. God is interested in the drama. He warns the Corinthians--and us--not to replay this drama in our own particular scenes. The scene is only the scene. The same drama could be played out in a setting that is nothing like Sinai. It can be played out in your life. God knows this. So His counsel to us puts the background in the background. In terms of what *causes* sinful behavior, circumstances are irrelevant. We are perhaps more likely to complain when things are difficult or be arrogant when things are going well; but we are *always* in danger of these sins because they aren't caused by the situation. Both grumbling and boasting come from a sinful heart.

There is often a temptation to think of these sinful reactions as being caused *both* by your sinful heart *and* difficult circumstances. This is the subtle temptation of self-righteousness: to blame yourself, but only partially; to take some responsibility, but only some. Think back over God's commentary on Israel's wilderness wanderings. There is not a hint of this "dual" responsibility. In fact, how could there be? Look again at Deuteronomy 8. Presumably Israel would have come to the promised land securely if there had been no enemies, no hunger, no thirst, and a swift journey. But God says that *He* sent the difficulties to Israel to test them, "to know what was in your heart." If we say Israel complained both because they were sinners and because their circumstances were hard, we make Israel partly responsible and God partly responsible. This cannot be! Israel couldn't enter the promised land for only one reason: they sinned.

Why is this important? Because we are all like Sue. We tend to explain sinful behavior by talking about the situation. We say we did something because... and don't admit that our hearts are the only cause. Is that so bad? Yes! It's subtle; but these kinds of statements about causes and motives are an attack on God's truth. We half excuse ourselves and so can't rightly repent. By pointing to our circumstances rather than to ourselves, we are robbed of faith that things can really be different. Circumstances might again be unpleasant. Sue has no guarantee that she and Bob won't get lost on the next hike (or on the way back.) If that's why she snapped, it will happen again. But in Christ she has a greater and more realistic hope. She has the gospel to change her. She and Bob might get lost again; but if she has been changed by the Holy Spirit, Bob need fear no unkind words--nor even the inward frustration and lack of love that they expressed! God's goal is that in the next similar situation Sue will be able to respond with joy, peace, endurance, and love. Perhaps she'll laugh it off and even enjoy the hike back! Perhaps she'll tough it out without complaining, and will drink water with gratitude to God at the end of the trail.

God's way is right. Our ways are foolish. We need to cultivate and master living according to His truth in every area of our lives. The use of "because" is a small thing. But the practice of half excusing ourselves, of repenting in a shallow way, of having little faith because our goal is comfort rather than Christlikeness—these are bigger problems, and common ones. Specifically training our lips can help us tackle these more serious heart issues.

Here's my challenge. Guard your lips over the next couple of weeks; watch how you use "bummed" and other slippery categories in describing your emotions. Think through what you're feeling, thinking, and doing by putting it in the context of what is happening between you and God. Watch how you use the word "because." When you catch yourself speaking about how circumstances were "hard" or "painful," stop yourself and focus on obedience and disobedience. The rest is just the scenery. If you have to speak about hard situations, use phrases like "even though" instead of "because"—something that leaves the focus on the important heart issues. But beyond the next couple of weeks let these examples become two of many as you, like the Psalmist, think through and analyze your speech. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in His sight. And may God give you great grace so that "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, (you will) do all to the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31).

Don't be afraid or overwhelmed by the process. If you look at your speech and see sin everywhere, that's an encouraging first step! Unless our experience of sin abounds, our experience of grace cannot much more abound. Grace abounds much more when a heightened awareness of sin drives us both to deeper repentance and a greater appreciation of the awesome power of Christ in setting us free, both in forgiving and transforming us. If you are a Christian, Romans 8:9 must interpret Galatians 5:16-25; I Corinthians 1:30 must interpret Proverbs 12:18-19 or Matthew 12:37.

Conclusion

All around you, unseen forces fight to keep you from conforming to the image of Jesus Christ: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Bible warns you to fight their influence: don't be conformed to the world, put to death the works of the flesh, and take up your armor to fight against the spiritual hosts of wickedness. God also warns that the battle is particularly important in your speech. The heart's attitudes are revealed in what you say. Thus in seeking to be righteous you must pay particular attention to how you talk; it is the best window into what's really in your heart. In fighting spiritual

battles you must be diligent to analyze how your enemies seek to twist your speech and make rebellious ways of speaking seem "normal." Being holy in your speech is not easy. James warns us that though we can tame wild animals, no human being can tame the tongue, a "restless evil, full of deadly poison." Here too, what is impossible with men is possible with God. The wisdom from above, freely given by God, makes the tongue flow with fresh water.

Personal Study

1. In what ways do you and people around you describe emotional experience in neutered terms? (e.g., "bummed," "upset," "having a bad day...").
2. What neutered terms do you and people around you use to describe sinful behavior? (e.g., "affair," "personality conflict," "low self esteem," "getting it off my chest...").
3. What neutered terms do you and people around you use to describe the reasons for behavior or emotion? (e.g., "Because he/she did...," "I have a felt need," "I really feel like...").
4. God's word isn't neutered. God defines good, bad, true, and false. Come up with a better biblical term for each of the above.
5. Let the above contrast lead you through the gospel. Come to Christ in repentance, and cultivate biblical hope and faith that He will change you. Meditate on who you are in Him and how this union will set you free.
6. Tell some others how you want to change your speech. Ask their prayers for the Spirit's power, and get them to hold you accountable.