

Taming the Tongue

This is an article to help a sport chaplain or sport mentor to deal with the issue of cursing and vulgar language among his/her coaches and players. It helps clarify the issues, deals with the weaknesses of various external approaches and directs the reader to consider the matters of the heart which come to light in one's speech. It also prescribes an inside-out approach to the issue.

“What did I just say?”

How many times have you been in the heat of competition and heard words coming out of your mouth that you weren't proud to have said? Maybe it's a pattern of coarse speech or cursing that you've had since childhood. Some of us accept this kind of language as a part of sport culture and never really think about it. Many of us however see it as a real problem and carry loads of guilt in our souls because we have no good solution for the habit we've developed.

For others of us the problem is not cursing but sarcasm and other forms of speech that belittle those at whom we direct it. This kind of abusive speech is just as injurious as cursing, but is somehow more culturally acceptable. Worse still, the sarcastic ones even congratulate themselves for not cursing, resulting in an even more prideful, self-righteous attitude.

Some coaches fall into a habit of critical speech and suffer the division and loss of trust that comes along with it. Second-guessing of their superiors and finding fault with their circumstances is terribly divisive and diminishes loyalty and respect among the coaching staff. Further, gossip is not limited to housewives over the back fence, but is a terribly destructive pattern for some coaches. Often among Christian coaches this takes the form of “sharing prayer concerns” for fellow coaches. Though coated in spiritual language, it's simply gossip; it wounds people and destroys relationships.

Many of us in the world of sport genuinely love God, but our speech would lead one to assume otherwise. We may have developed a habit of vulgar or abusive language over a long time and have found it to be a very difficult flesh pattern to correct. This discord between our expressions of love for Christ and our more coarse expressions of frustration or disgust lead many to discount the validity of our faith and our devotion to the Lord Jesus. Worse still, those prone to judgment will label us as hypocrites and will turn away from the faith blaming our inconsistency as the reason for their unbelief.

Many of us have struggled with this flesh pattern by trying to outwardly regulate our flesh with varying levels of success. Some people simply make up substitute curse words. Others impose fines or forms of punishment on themselves and those around them for the utterance of offensive words. While these may seem to deal directly with the behavior, they are

sometimes just our vain attempts to punish and discourage a stubborn pattern of our flesh.

The problem with this strategy and the reason for the resulting frustration is that the root of the issue is much deeper than one's flesh; it is a matter of the heart. Jesus said it this way, **“For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.”**(Matthew 12:34b NKJV) Thus no amount of external control of one's flesh can be truly effective; we must deal with the heart. The Apostle Paul expressed this same frustration in these words, **“For I know that in me (that is in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.”**(Romans 7:18 NKJV)

God has but one agent for dealing with the deepest matters of the heart and the transformation of our souls, the Holy Spirit. The key to life-changing power for overcoming such powerful habits is the application of God's Word to our lives. **“For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”** (Philippians 2:13)

The following is a simple plan for taming our tongues through the transformation of our hearts:

1) Begin with the understanding that a healthy motivation for such life change is a genuine love for God and a desire to please Him, not just a desire to avoid the consequences of improper speech.

2) Understand that if you are in relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, you are already forgiven and are pleasing to God because of your relationship with Christ. **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** (Romans 8:1 NASB) Because of these truths, you are now free to choose speech that is also pleasing to Him.

3) When you fail, confess it to God as sin. Don't rationalize or excuse yourself. Don't beat yourself up or wallow in self-pity. Agree with God about it and move on. **“If we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** (1 John 1:9 NASB)

If it's helpful to have someone to whom you give account for your speech, share your successes and failures with that person on a regular basis. Above all, be faithful to share your failures and frustration with God in prayer. **“He who conceals his sin will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes it will find compassion.”** (Proverbs 28:13 NASB)

4) Memorize strategic scriptures to transform your mind. Many times we default to our vulgar vocabulary because there's simply nothing else that comes to mind. By memorizing scriptures specifically about speech, we invite the Holy Spirit to shape our lives through His work of calling the words of God to our remembrance. **“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all that I said to you.”** (John 14:26)

Work on one verse at a time, beginning with the ones that most strongly speak to your heart. **“Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against You.”** (Psalm 119:105 NKJV) Do whatever it takes to get these scriptures into your mind. Print them out and tape them to the bathroom mirror to read as you prepare for the day, tape them onto your computer monitor or on the dashboard of your car. Write them out on paper several times. Repeat them out loud several times a day. Find a partner to memorize them with you and test each

other.

Whatever it costs, pay it and you'll see the changes begin. There is a suggested list of scriptures for memorization at the end of this article.

You should expect it to take a while to make lasting changes in your speech patterns. Habits that have formed over years or decades seldom disappear overnight. Live daily in the disciplines of worship, confession, prayer and scripture memory and you can expect to see transformation of your heart, your mind and your tongue. ***“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** (Romans 12:2 NASB)

Suggested scriptures to memorize:

- Ephesians 4:29 – ***“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”***
- Proverbs 10:19 – ***“When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.”***
- Proverbs 15:1 – ***“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”***
- Proverbs 17:27-28 – ***“He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool, when he keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is counted prudent.”***
- Proverbs 21:24 – ***“Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue keeps his soul from trouble.”***
- Proverbs 25:11 – ***“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.”***
- James 3:9 – ***“With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of Go; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.”***
- James 1:26 – ***“If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.”***

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Bible Reference:

James 3



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