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# Paul's Profanity



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Tuesday, February 2, I started a year-long commitment to a discipleship group, mentored by Bob Chisholm, one of the ministers at my church. It's Bob and 3 guys, and he meets with 4 different groups each on a separate day of the week, at 5:30am. So while I meet with him once a week, he meets with 4 groups of 3 every week, which I think is very cool because that's 12 guys, just like Jesus. Anyway, in our daily scripture reading I came across something incredibly fascinating that I just had to share.

Philippians chapter 3 is a very uplifting chapter. Paul describes his previous life and how he had considered works of the flesh to be his righteousness. He talks about how he has left everything for the Gospel and even considers what he's lost as nothing compared to the glory of Christ which he has been given. It's a beautiful passage for certain, that is, until you read it in the original Greek and find that it's highly offensive. Here's the passage as it's translated in the NIV.

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...

–Philippians 3:8

Isn't that nice? Paul considers the things he's lost as rubbish. The Greek word translated as "rubbish" is *skybalon*, but that's not the most accurate translation of the Greek. *Skybalon* is a dirty word in Greek, and our lovely wholesome translators have really dulled the translation down. What does it mean? The NET Bible translates it as "dung", which is still not quite the full meaning. The NET Bible note on verse 8's "dung" says:

The word here translated "dung" was often used in Greek as a vulgar term for fecal matter. As such it would most likely have had a certain shock value for the readers.

This may well be Paul's meaning here, especially since the context is about what the *flesh* produces.

Paul swears in his letter. This wasn't like saying "I consider them poop," or "I consider them fecal matter", no it was much worse than that. Skybalon was a vulgar term! It has been found in ancient graffiti and in manuscripts linking it as pure profanity! Paul purposefully uses a vulgar and offensive term in his letter in order to grab the attention of his readers and get into their faces. But this isn't the only place he's been known to get up into people's faces. He does it in Romans as well.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

–Romans 6:1-2

What the NIV translates as "By no means!" is the Greek "Me genoito" which is the strongest Greek idiom to indicate repudiation (refusal to accept and implies a casting off or disowning as untrue, unauthorized, or unworthy of acceptance) and even conveys the idea of *outraged indignation*. In other words, it was equivalent to today's "hell no!"

Of course, this isn't anything new. The Tanakh has a few places of questionable language itself, such as when Rehoboam consults his friends to decide if he will listen to the people or not. His friends' advice is rather startling.

The young men who had grown up with him replied, "Tell these people who have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter' -tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist.

–1 Kings 12:10

Once again our Bible translators are so nice as to dull the eye-popping response of the friends. The literal Hebrew says, "-say unto them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's loins'". What's the implication here? You get the picture, and you can see why Rehoboam's friends gave such poor advice: they're talking about penis size! Yikes!

So what's the point in all of this? Why does Paul use such striking language in his letters, and even profanity? The Bible uses language which will grab its readers and widen their eyes. If it can make you uncomfortable, you're listening with a different focus than if you're emotionally unaffected. For Paul, he wanted it to be crystal clear about what his past life of works-righteousness meant to him. It wasn't merely garbage, no, and it wasn't poop. He considered it all pure s\*\*t [edit: censored on request by my wife]. If that last sentence I wrote doesn't make you uncomfortable –

perhaps a bit squeamish in your chair – then you need to seriously ask yourself why. Of course it made you uncomfortable to read that on this nice religious blog, and for the Apostle Paul to be saying it in a letter considered to be Holy Scripture? Even moreso! But that’s the very effect he wanted. He wanted it get awkwardly silent in the room right after they read the Greek word *skybalon*. Can you feel the tension as people look at one another with awkward glances? Can you hear the silence as everyone stops breathing for just a moment? Can you see the confusion as they all want to look at the letter and see for themselves if the reader read it right. “How could it be?” they ask themselves. How could Paul, the very one who wrote to the Ephesian church not to let any unwholesome talk come out of their mouths, write such a thing?

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

–Ephesians 4:29

How could he say that??? The answer is simple. In this case, Paul’s carefully planned use of a single vulgar word brings any who subscribe to works-righteousness out of their hard shell. His vulgar word breaks through it and suddenly they hear his words for what they are. Was his talk unwholesome? Yes. But was it helpful for “building up others according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen”? I would say yes, a resounding yes.

But also notice that Paul doesn’t do this often. He doesn’t lace his sermons and letters with swear words. He gets mad, for instance with the Galatians for being so ignorant (Gal 3:1), but he doesn’t “cuss them out” for it either. Paul’s use of this one vulgar word is not an excuse to go crazy. It’s not an excuse to start sounding like the world (e.g. such as today where some use the f-word like a comma). But can the occasional offensive word be used strategically to reach people and even to “build them up according to their needs”? I’d say yes, but with one caveat: be careful with when and how you use it. I’m sure Paul thought for a long time before asking his scribe to pen that word into his letter and I’m sure it wasn’t an easy decision. Do not be flippant in the use of vulgar words with the excuse of trying to reach people. If you use them too often, you will lose your credibility as a set-apart follower of the Messiah, and the shock factor is dulled beyond use.

Of course, you can reach people without the use of vulgar words too. But for everything, there is a season (Ecc 3:1). It’s certainly something to think about.

Peace to you,

James

