

Euphemisms

By dictionary definition, a euphemism is "the substitution of a mild, indirect, or vague expression for one thought to be offensive, harsh, or blunt." When one uses a euphemism, he or she is attempting to soften the impact of a word or phrase.

We find a euphemism in the Bible in John 11:11 when Jesus told His apostles, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." Believing that he actually was just asleep, the apostles replied, "Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well." (verse 12). "Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead." (verse 14). Exactly why Jesus chose to refer to death as sleep here is unknown. Since that day many more euphemisms for death have been developed (e.g., passed on, gone to their reward, etc.), but each represents the simple fact that the person has died. These particular euphemisms soften a harsher word ("dead") but they are not offensive or ungodly.

Now let's consider unacceptable usages of euphemisms. Again, keep the definition in mind. Also keep in mind the fact that every one of these represents another word or phrase. Without devoting this space to a catalog of euphemisms, let's consider those most commonly used, even by Christians from time to time; namely, those euphemisms for our Lord. "Goodness," "gosh," "golly," are regularly used instead of "God." Even "jeez" is used instead of "Jesus." Use of these euphemisms alone is most certainly taking the Lord's name in vain, but when you combine these with words like, "darn," "dang," etc. it's easy to see that one is dishonoring the Lord with these terms. From a worldly standpoint, these euphemisms are cute, quaint and totally harmless. If we were trying to live by the world's standards then there would be nothing wrong with any of these terms. However, we as Christians are striving to live by a higher standard, specifically, that which God has established in His Word. This standard calls us to holiness (I Peter 1:15) and to glory and virtue (II Peter 1:3). As a result, anything that smacks of unholy language should be avoided.

Why would Christians use euphemisms? Surely they would never use the words they represent (or we hope they would not). Could it be that they just don't know any better? Is it possible that they never thought about it? Perhaps they have heard sermons or read articles about euphemisms but just didn't think the matter was that important. Must we use euphemisms? One time a man said to me, "I've never heard you swear but a swear word every now and then isn't bad." Is that true? If not, then why would use of euphemisms be any different?

The fact of the matter is that using euphemisms, like the words they represent, is a manifestation of one's inability to express himself or herself. Curse words or euphemisms are used when one is angry, frustrated or even surprised or excited. Of course there are other ways to express oneself, ways that are pure and exemplary. Our anger can be vented without euphemisms (Ephesians 4:26). Our frustration can be expressed in a way that does not dishonor God (James 3:2). Our excitement can be verbalized in a constructive, positive manner (Colossians 4:6).

The Bible has so much to say about how we use our words, however, these comments by Jesus seem to sum it all up: "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." (Matthew 12:34-37). It's as simple as this: Our words reveal our hearts.

Christians don't need to employ euphemisms in their conversations. They are not helpful and could in fact be destructive. Whenever you're tempted to blurt out one of these, think first about the word that euphemism represents. Do you really mean to pronounce damnation on someone or something? Do you mean to reference hell or use God's name in a vain way? Do you mean to utter a vulgarity? If not, then stop those words before they leave your mouth.

"In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in...sound speech, that cannot be condemned..." (Titus 2:7-8).