

“A Time and Place for Profanity”
Philippians 3:4b–14
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October 4, 2026

The first time I heard a preacher use profanity in a sermon was when I was in high school. A pastoral care professor led a retreat that weekend and preached on Sunday. He used an expletive to get peoples’ attention and to underscore a theme of the weekend, that we can be open and honest with God about how we feel. I wasn’t scandalized because I had heard a lot of interesting words in my young life, I hadn’t grown up in church, but I did notice some people around me squirming a bit.

The next time I heard a preacher use profanity in a sermon was at a college retreat. Tony Campolo, with whom I developed a friendship over the years, was preaching on a frequent theme of his — economic justice. And as he said to many groups at the time, he told us, “50,000 people died today of hunger. That’s bad, but what’s worse is that none of you give a damn. And what’s even worse is that most of you are more upset because I used the word ‘damn’ than you are because 50,000 children of God died needlessly today, in a world where there is enough for all.” Tony was using profanity to make a point and to give perspective. What scandalizes us says a great deal about what we value most.

To be clear, I am not making a case for using profanity casually. For the younger ears in the room, do not try this out on your parents. It will not end well. I’m just saying that there may be a time and place for profanity, occasions when strong language is required to make a point. Even the Apostle Paul uses profanity in our reading from Philippians. He has a great deal to be proud of in terms of his heritage as a Jewish leader, faithfulness to God, and place of importance in the community, he says, but all this pales in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. It is all just a pile of *skubala*, he says!

Our translation renders this as rubbish, it is sometimes translated as refuse or dung, but these are all euphemisms. What Paul is saying is that it is all a pile of s-h-i-t! It is an intentional profanity designed to shock so

that his hearers get the point of just how transcendent and transforming his experience with Christ is. Nothing else comes close to comparing! Nothing else really matters anymore! We might wonder whether he could have made the point without cursing, but apparently, he didn't think so, and if we examine the context, we see why.

Just before our reading begins, Paul tells his readers to beware of evil workers who mutilate the flesh. He is not talking about people outside the church who would lead the faithful astray. He is not talking about tattoo artists or machete wielding criminals. "Mutilation of flesh" here refers to circumcision, and it's not literal circumcision that concerns Paul but a group of people in the church who insist on following the letter of the law which requires circumcision and take pride in doing so.

There is no room for spiritual pride in a faith where grace lies at the heart of everything. If Jesus is Savior and Lord, there is no room for pride at all. For people inside the church to miss this and insist that others follow them makes Paul cussing mad!

But how does it make us feel? I don't mean the curse word. How does this pointed way of asking whether we truly embrace our experience in Christ as the central transcendent reality in our lives make us feel? We don't need the strong language. We're Jesus people through and through. We really are... and are not... because we hold onto many other values and interests that sometimes make faith, in the radical sense of following Jesus no matter what, inconvenient.

We build walls around our spiritual egos, we rationalize incredibly well, I certainly do. My mother, who was an English literature professor, taught a logic class, and always contended that I should present the lecture on rationalization. Garrison Keillor calls it BS-ification. We care about the poor, there are just too many poor people to help. What does it hurt if we laugh at the joke that demeans women, persons of color, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, or people with different abilities? We put Jesus first, we just have other priorities, like our political affiliation, our own self-interest, not to mention an array of leisure interests. We follow Jesus, but we want limits. We don't want to be too serious about faith.

I have told some of you about a friend I went to high school and college with that I ran into at a White Castle when I was in seminary. He

felt a need to tell me why he stopped going to our campus church in college. He said it was because we took things too seriously, with all our community ministry projects and social events. We were almost like a cult. The problem was that church was too important to us. Following Jesus was too central to our lives. Many Christians in our culture today would feel this way about the Apostle Paul.

In contrast, I remember a worship service in the mountain community of Sisit in Kenya where a number of us helped build a bridge in 2012. There were several unusual things about that service, including the fact that I learned that I was preaching during the prelude music. But it was deeply personal, profoundly moving, and every person who spoke, prayed, or sang, began by saying, “I love Jesus.” At first, it felt artificial, but then we all realized it was not. Love for Jesus came first in everything for the people in that community in a way we struggle to appreciate in our privileged culture with so many options.

The threat of losing this focus moves Paul to use profanity, but he does more than cuss. He also talks about longing to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in death. We get the first part of this but not so much the second. Yet death and resurrection are part of the same story, suffering and joy cannot be separated in Christian experience, knowing Christ Jesus as Lord involves a pattern of life in which we give all and, in the process, know joy that cannot otherwise be known.

There are Christians in other parts of the world who know a great deal about suffering that grows directly out of faith — people in Pakistan and Afghanistan where being a Christian can be dangerous, people in Gaza and the West Bank where Christian Palestinians share the lot of Muslim and non-theist Palestinians, our own friends and partners in Ukraine who suffer with their fellow citizens under the weight of Russian aggression and inconsistent support of our country.

This is not our experience, though we have our own struggles, but we cannot remain indifferent to the suffering of our sisters and brothers around the world or to the refugees from violent contexts who come here seeking asylum. In fact, we have a calling to help these fellow members of the body of Christ, as well as other members of the human family, any

way we can, and this often involves setting aside other priorities and taking risks on behalf of others; suffering, like Jesus, for others.

During the Civil Rights movement, many white Christians risked their lives for brothers and sisters of color. A similar movement is growing today on behalf of immigrants and refugees among us. Archbishop Oscar Romero took great risks on behalf of the victims of injustice in El Salvador and was shot and killed in 1980 like many others with the courage to speak up for others like King, Ghandi, Gallego, Rabin. It's why Robert Jordan, later a Georgia Supreme Court Judge, refused to help his brother Clarence with tensions surrounding the interracial nature of Koinonia Farm. I have dreams, he told him, and I follow Jesus to the cross, not on the cross, I'm not getting myself killed.

That doesn't sound unreasonable, who wants to die? And there are ways to shift our priorities toward Christ without suffering - do partnership work, volunteer more in Raleigh, give more to help those in need. But Paul says Christian life is about wanting to know Christ and share in his resurrection and sufferings; not just going to church, singing a few songs, and trying to be nice.

Nothing can compare with knowing Christ fully, Paul says, but he is quick to add that he hasn't accomplished this, it is ever a work-in-progress, which gives us hope in our state of incompleteness. It is not a blessing on complacency but a call to perseverance. Paul employs a running metaphor, which may cause some of you to wonder how I waited this long to get to it... but he says he never looks back over his shoulder to what is in the past, whether it is a source of pride or guilt. Looking back only slows a runner down, and it is a hindrance in Christian faith. So, Paul strains forward to what lies ahead and presses on toward the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Such is our calling.

It may seem like a demanding request, and it is not what much of the American church is about these days. I suspect Paul would be moved to cuss by the loud voices claiming to be Christian while rejecting almost all of Jesus' teachings. We might be moved to use a few strong words too, but the important thing is to remain true to our calling. It's what binds us to other Christians around the world, especially those who are suffering, and it's what enables us to continue the work of Christ.