Swearing, Honesty, and the Bible

By Dave DeWitt

The web is full of articles based upon scientific research, some recent, some dating back as far as 2010, which claim a positive connection between swearing and honesty. I will quote excerpts from two of them published in January of 2017.

If You Swear a Lot, You're More Honest — Science Says So

This was published by Caroline Picard, January 3, 2017 [Copyright the Rubicon Project 2010; www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/news/a42172/swearing-honesty-study].

"Scientists from the University of Cambridge recently surveyed 276 people about their most commonly-used swear words and how often they say or write them. The test also measured the participants' honesty with questions about blaming others, cheating at games, and taking advantage of people.

And surprise, surprise: Those who used salty language the most lied the least. 'There are two ways of looking at it. You might think if someone is swearing a lot, this is a negative social behavior,' study co-author David Stillwell told the *Daily Mail.* 'On the other hand, they are not filtering their language so they are probably also not putting their stories about what is going on through similar filters which might turn them into untruths.'… A second, larger experiment with almost 74,000 Facebook users pointed to the same conclusion … It turned out people who keep it clean also try to look cooler online, even if it involves fudging the truth.

Do We Find People Who Swear More Honest? "Yes," Says New Study

This article was published January 15, 2017, by Paul Ratner [http://bigthink.com/paul-ratner/do-we-find-people-who-swear-more-honest-yes-says-new-study].

"Profanity was associated with less lying and deception at the individual level, and with higher integrity at the society level," write the researchers, led by Gilad Feldman of the Department of Work and Psychology in Maastricht University in the Netherlands.

What the scientists found was that people are more likely to swear to express themselves rather than to use the swearing as an attack on others.

Swearing Is Not Recent

We have reference to swearing in the ancient Latin world from the time of Cicero (106-43 B.C.). Also, Danielle Skjelver wrote this about Martin Luther (1483-1546):

"With words sublime, he gave the Christian God back to the common man, and yet Luther also spoke with shocking cruelty and vulgarity. Martin Luther's employment of vulgarity, and specifically scatological vulgarity [terms of "excrement and excretion"], in his writings and speech has drawn criticism, embarrassment, and accusations of psychological instability. But there was power in this coarse language, for Martin Luther's combative use of scatology defined him as a virile male in sixteenth century Germany" [scribd.com].

Of course, the liberal/progressives love to equate swearing and honesty because it seems to destroy traditional values, especially Christian biblical values, and allows for something vulgar to be labeled "progress" into a more highly evolved society.

Most of us Bible believers cringe at this because we know the Bible condemns swearing. The third of the 10 commandments says:

- *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain* (Exodus 20:7).

Jesus said:

- *But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned* (Matthew 12:36-7).

Paul wrote,

- *…there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks* (Ephesians 5:4).

Whatever this means, it surely condemns swearing. So if swearing is bad and honesty is good, why are there so many studies that tie the two together? We could simply deny the studies, but that's probably not wis,e since it has been done by a variety of people, in different parts of the world, for a long time (at least since 2010), with similar results. So, what's going on here?

First, notice what the studies have **not** found:

1. They have not found that swearing enhanced honesty. The two occur together in certain studies, but that in no way says one aids the other. If Mafia drug cartels are connected with family loyalty, that does not mean the way to enhance family loyalty is to be in a drug cartel. The fact that a virtue and an indecency are found together does not imply that the indecency aided the virtue, only that some factor produced both.
2. The reason the two are together is not determined by any studies. Some suggest it's because "They are not filtering their language." Others suggest neither swearers nor honest people focus on what others think. It could also be that our society is so decadent, so accepting of sin, that there is no need to be dishonest about it. But these are only guesses. No study has proven why the two are together.
3. The surveys do not deal with the reality that both swearing and dishonesty are on the rise. What they don't discuss is that swearing is increasing exponentially. This may simply be a reflection of an exponentially decadent society, or a world of increasing stress and uncertainty. But whatever its cause, its increase is undeniable, and there is no such increase of honesty.
4. The research does not conclude that swearing during outbursts of anger is connected to honesty. The swearing in the surveys is about words used in casual or descriptive dialogue, not outbursts of anger. Nothing in the surveys connects swearing to outbursts of anger.
5. The research does not explain why swearing is prominent among the most depraved people of society, such as prison inmates, ghetto mobs, and street gangs. With them, swearing is part of the lingo that goes with the territory. But it is not an indication that these are the most honest people.
6. The research also does not account for the exponential increase in profanity in this century. I went to college with totally worldly roommates in the 1960s, and they did not put a swear word into every sentence as is often done today.
7. Just because you are honest does not mean you are right, or good. A reprobate might swear a lot and be honest about his immorality and crazy ideas. For example, he might swear while honestly describing his sexual encounters. That does not make his sexual encounters good or right.
8. The conclusions of the studies do not distinguish between blasphemy against God and other forms of swearing. Whereas in Scripture, blasphemy against God is in a category all its own.
   - **Blaspheme** [βλασφημέω (*Blasphemeo*)] is to revile, or defame, using abusive speech (NAS Greek Concordance).
   - **Swearing** is "the use of offensive language" (The New Oxford American Dictionary). The Greek word in the New Testament [ὀμνύω (*omnuo*)] is "to make an oath," not to "use offensive language."

The surveys may not be representative of all segments of society. But the studies demonstrate something. The question is, "What is that something?" and "Can it be found in the Bible?"

What Does the Bible Say About Blaspheme and Harsh Words?

First of all, it is clear that the Bible condemns any kind of blasphemy of God, casual or otherwise.

- **Exodus 20:7** *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain…* (quoted above).

- **1 Timothy 1:20** *Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.*

The same condemnation is clear about harsh words and outbursts of anger.
- **Proverbs 12:18** *There is one who **speaks rashly** like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*
- **Galatians 5:19-20** *Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, **outbursts of anger**…*
- **Colossians 3:8** *But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and **abusive speech** from your mouth.*

The Bible Recognizes that Harsh Truth Is Better than Smooth Lies
- **Proverbs 12:19** *Truthful lips will be established forever, but a lying tongue is only for a moment.*
- **Proverbs 26:28** *A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin.*
- **Proverbs 28:23** *He who rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.*
- **Ephesians 4:15** *but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,*

Godly Men in the Bible Did Not Always Use Soft Words, Neither Did God
God said:
- *I will **spread refuse** on your* [the priests'] *faces* (Malachi 2:3), *I have come **to hate** her* [Judah] (Jeremiah 12:8), *I Myself have also **stripped your skirts off** over your* [Judah] *face that your shame may be seen* (Jeremiah 13:26).

David wrote some pretty harsh words and did some tough name calling:
- *that You would slay the wicked, O God; Depart from me, therefore, **men of bloodshed** …Do I not **hate those who hate You**, O LORD? And do I not **loathe those who rise up against You**? I hate them with the utmost hatred* (Psalm 139:19-22).

I remember years ago hearing a literature professor say (from my memory, not a direct quote), "Matthew 23 is the harshest language ever used by anybody against anybody in all of literature." Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, and He said:
- **Matthew 23:15** *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, **hypocrites**, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much **a son of hell as yourselves…***
- **Matthew 23:17** *You **fools and blind men**….*
- **Matthew 23:24** *You **blind guides**, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!.. For you are like **whitewashed tombs** which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness*
- **Matthew 23:33** ***You serpents, you brood of vipers**, how will you escape the sentence of hell?*
- **John 8:44** *"**You are of your father the devil**, and you want to do the desires of your father.*

He even told Peter:
- *Get behind me **Satan** you are a **stumbling block** to Me* [not a very nice way to talk to the "pope" (Matthew 16:23)]

Jesus' half -brother Jude also used some rough language to describe false teachers:
- **Jude 12-13** *These are the men who are **hidden reefs** in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; **clouds without water**, carried along by winds; **autumn trees without fruit**,*

doubly dead, *uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam**; wandering stars,
for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever.***

Paul told the Ephesians to only use words that were *good for edification according to the need of the moment*
(Ephesians 4:29). But when he was dealing with a *Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-jesus,* we read:

- *But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, "You
  who are **full of all deceit and fraud**, you **son of the devil**, you **enemy of all righteousness,** will you not
  cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?* (Acts 13:9-10)

That's pretty rough name calling.
Paul told the Galatians,

- *I wish that those who are troubling you would even **mutilate themselves*** (Galatians 5:12).

Again, pretty harsh language.
Just before Stephen was stoned to death, he said this, being filled with the Holy Spirit:

- *You men who are **stiff-necked** and **uncircumcised in heart and ears** are **always resisting the Holy Spir-
  it*** (Acts 7:51).

Also, pretty harsh.

Jesus' Two Uses of the Word for "Fool"

In Matthew 5, Jesus talked about using the word *fool* [μωρος (*moros*), from which English gets the word "mor-
on"] and ῥακά (*hraka*), a similar Aramaic word meaning "empty head" or "good for nothing."

- *You have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not commit murder" and "Whoever commits
  murder shall be liable to the court." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall
  be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother,* [ῥακά (*hraka*)] *'You good-for-nothing,'
  shall be guilty before the supreme court; and **whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go in-
  to the fiery hell*** (Matthew 5:21-22).

Notice, Jesus connected the three words *murder–anger– fool,* the act–the motive–a word representing the mo-
tive. This is a condemnation that puts the one using the word *fool* in the place of a murderer. Matthew 5 does
not address any sin on the part of the one called a *fool,* he's just called *his brother.* But while Jesus was with His
disciples, He addressed the Pharisees as, *You **fools** and blind men!* (Matthew 23:17). Both are the same word for
fool, but in Matthew 23, Jesus described the specific sins of the Pharisees. Paul used the same word for *fool* to
describe the sins of people who *suppress the truth in unrighteousness,* when he said: *Professing to be wise, they
became **fools*** (Romans 1:18 & 22).

So, the moral condemnation in Matthew 5 was not about using the word *fool* but using it, or any word, to con-
demn a person you are angry with. Matthew 23 and Romans 1 are a condemnation of a specific sin against God,
which, of course, cannot be separated from the sinner.

Conclusion: Honest People May Use Strong Words for Honest Descriptions

Swearing is a traditionally offensive vulgar emphasis. In the Bible, it's not swearing that's connected to hones-
ty, it's strong descriptive language. Biblical characters sometimes used harsh words to describe sinful thought
and actions of people who were opposing the kingdom of God. The words were descriptive, expressive, graphic,
detailed, vivid, striking, and explanatory. They were not vulgar expletives or character assassinations. They
were not swear words. Rather, they were words that get our attention. They were like parables (as the unjust
judge) and hyperbolic statements (*if your eye causes you to stumble pluck it out*) because they communicated a
vivid description which would not be communicated accurately with gentle words. Those descriptions connect
the ones telling the truth to *salty* language like: false teacher, hypocrite, God-hater, depraved, or someone adul-
terating or bastardizing the Word of God. Jesus said: *Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will
you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves…* (Mark 9:50).