

## CLEANSE ME

At this point in my life, my physical cleanliness is almost totally in the hands of others. I do the few things I can, such as wash my face with the assistance of aides, so that I will retain these abilities as long as possible. I think of these tasks as occupational therapy for, in fact, that's what they are.

In the seven months that I have been a resident of Sky View Health Care Center, I have certainly been pleased with my physical care. Routinely I am given two thorough showers and shampoos a week plus a sponge bath morning and evening daily. Of course there is cleansing with diaper changes as well. Body lotions and creams are liberally applied at various times. My clothing is kept clean by the laundry workers here at Sky View. Almost always I feel clean, and that matters so much to me.

In addition there is a high standard of cleanliness here for our rooms. At least twice a week my bed is made up with clean linens. Almost daily members of the housekeeping staff come in to clean my bathroom, sweep and mop my floor, do light dusting and empty my waste cans, relining them with plastic bags. A couple times a month a man sprays and buffs my floor. Three times my quarters have been given a thorough cleaning. During those times I must leave my room for an hour while a crew moves my furniture to clean behind and under it, and all surfaces are dusted. At any time, if I need some extra cleaning done (to remove a spill from the floor, for example), I notify the nurse who in turn calls housekeeping, and the matter is soon handled.

As for neatness, my family and friends help me with organizing, filing, decorating and recycling. To work efficiently, I need to be clean and to have clean, fairly neat surroundings. I have them both at Sky View. Many thanks to all those who work together to make me comfortable!

– July, 2006

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As important as outer cleanliness is, to me inner cleanliness is even more so. I am referring to being free of the filth caused by sin, both ours by choice and by the contamination of our sinful society that often enters into us unbidden and makes us dirty. The Bible clearly states that no one escapes being tainted by sin (*Romans 3:23: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*). Thankfully, it also offers a remedy, often using terms that have to do with washing, bathing, cleansing or purifying – terms we can all understand. Here are some passages that come to mind:

– “Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (*Isaiah 1:18*).

– Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (*Psalms 51:2,7*).

– Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed. you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (*1 Corinthians 6:9-11, underlining mine*).

– Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God (*2 Corinthians 7:1*).

– If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (*1 John 1:9*).

– Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” For he knew who was going to betray him, and that is why he said not every one was clean (*John 13:9,10*).

With these Scriptures and many more in mind, I will now explore various thoughts about all sorts of cleanliness.

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When babies are born into human families, they need two things immediately: air and a bath. They need to breathe the air of their new environment and to be cleansed from all that clings to them from their old environment and from their passage into the new. After that the babies are dressed and fed, and the growth process begins. Breathing, bathing, dressing and eating continue throughout our lives on earth. And so does growth. True, we reach our maximum height and stop growing taller, but our hair and nails continue to grow and our cells are ever changing. We are always being physically renewed; we are a work in progress.

We come into God's spiritual family by a birth that, while different, can be understood by thinking of physical birth as a pattern. One big contrast is that people have nothing to do with their first birth. With the spiritual (or second) birth, God is calling us, wooing us with his love, inviting us by his Spirit to join his family, and waiting for our response. God gets our attention in different ways: there may be a longing within us for change; a sense that something is missing; an awareness of sin's defilement; a fear of death; or a desire that comes from observing the people of faith with whom we interact. The Bible tells us clearly that God wants everyone to come to him; it is not God's will for anyone to perish, that is, to die without a relationship with him, resulting in eternal separation.

While none of us remember our physical birth, we all know that every human being who has ever lived (with the exception of Adam and Eve) certainly was born. It is just as certain that every member of God's faith family entered by way of spiritual birth, even if they do not remember when it took place or the circumstances surrounding the event. Those of us who do remember describe the experience in various ways, from warm and wonderful to spectacular and revolutionary.

All who are born into the spiritual realm, having said yes to God's call, have the same immediate needs that human newborns have: we need to breathe the air of our new environment and to be cleansed from our sin, from all the defilement that clings to us from our old environment. To take care of the first, our triune God breathes into us his Holy Spirit, enabling us to live in the Spirit, something that cannot be done with mere earthly resources. God actually lives inside his children, as well as all around them – a sure formula for adventure! What's more, the Holy Spirit comes into spiritual newborns bearing gifts to welcome them into God's family, gifts that may be used to serve God in due time.

And for the second, God bathes each of his new children in the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who died so that our sins could be washed away. It might seem strange to think that we can be cleansed with a blood bath, but God's ways are different from and higher than ours. The blood of Jesus really does cleanse us from all sins, even the ones that could be classified as scarlet or red as crimson. To the sensitive, even sins that many would overlook can be felt as a heavy load. At the end of our bath, we stand before God FORGIVEN! With the layers of filth gone, and with the burden lifted, some feel so light at this point that it seems they could fly!

Now it's time to get dressed. As we enter his family, God puts on each one of us a robe made of Christ's righteousness, so that we are actually covered by the perfections of our Lord! It doesn't matter that we can't see our new clothing; what matters is that GOD can see it. No wonder God loves us so much: When he looks at us, he sees us wrapped in the beauty of his Son! What a privilege to be so identified with Jesus!

And now God's newborn child is ready for a meal. The food, of course, is different from that which sustains our bodies, but the desire – the hunger – is similar. One of the first Bible passages I memorized early in my Christian life is 1 Peter 2:2,3: *Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.* And so the first meal in our new life gives us a simple yet profound message we can spread with confidence: "The Lord is good!"

After that we take in as much pure spiritual milk as we want so that we can mature and use the gifts God gave us to serve him. Eating and serving; taking in and giving out: This is the pattern for a joyful, abundant life with God.

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There's another parallel between the two births that I want to bring up now, and that is the permanence of the transactions. A baby who has been born can never be unborn. There may be all sorts of unhappy conclusions after the event, but none can erase the fact that the birth took place. It is the same with the second birth. A person who has been "born again," who has experienced a spiritual birth, can never be "un-born again," even if the person does not grow in the way God wants his children to grow. What a tremendous truth this is!

To clarify, let's take another look at some of what happens to people being born into God's family. As I have said, immediately God, who attends all spiritual births as the Perfect Physician and Perfect Parent, gives them the Holy Spirit, washes them and dresses them. There is no set order in which these things happen, for the spiritual realm is eternal; the time and space rules that govern our earthly lives do not apply. But since we write and read on earth in a time and space sequence, I will use the order I gave above.

The first Scripture that comes to mind concerning the Holy Spirit's part in our permanent salvation is Ephesians 1:13,14, underlining mine: *Having believed, you were marked in [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.* To grasp the significance of these marvelous words, we must understand that, just as our Heavenly Parent is God and Jesus Christ is God, so the Holy Spirit is God. Thus those of us who have believed, who have been born into God's family, are both sealed and guaranteed our inheritance by God himself! I picture the deposit as being inside of us and the seal on the outside, giving us double protection much as a deposit of money in an envelope is protected by the wrapping itself and by the seal we give it. We may not know the full extent of our inheritance, but surely it includes the reserved and prepared place in Heaven that Jesus promised his children! Our safety in God's family brings praise and glory to God. Rest assured: God will never take back his deposit!

To understand the permanence of our initial bath, we must consider the cleansing agent (the blood of Jesus) and the reason the agent was made available (the love of God). Only then will the results (complete forgiveness and eternal life) make sense. The Bible verse that I must address now is John 3:16, underlining mine: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* It is hard to express on paper what I am feeling just now about the little word "so." How much does God love us? So much that he gave his life that we might live. Remember that Jesus Christ is God. We must never think that God loved us so much that he chose some lesser being to die for us. No, this was pure self-giving love. I believe many things about God that I can't explain, and I am content with that. God is so "other" than human beings that the more mystery I find wrapped around the Godhead, the more I want to bow at his feet in worship.

When was the cleansing blood shed for us? That depends on which realm you are referring to. In the spiritual, eternal realm, the decision was made and carried out before the universe and people were even created. God knew before he made humans exactly how we would turn out and that if any of us wished to come into a love relationship with him (which is why he made people with the ability to choose), a perfect blood sacrifice that only God could provide would have to be in place for the bath we would need. With all that knowledge, God created us anyway. That's love!

If you are thinking of the earthly realm, where time and space prevail, the cleansing blood was shed by Jesus on Calvary's cross nearly two thousand years ago. The Old Testament is full of stories about the shedding of blood of innocent animals for the remission of the sins of human beings, showing that we can't take away our sins by ourselves. All this, plus many prophecies and hints, set the stage for the most astonishing event in history: the incarnation. The eternal Son of God actually was born as a human

baby so he could grow up and shed his perfect blood as an atonement for our sins. Paul prayed that we might grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. Meditating on the word “so” in John 3:16 is a good place to begin!

Jesus himself spoke the words we are considering, and what did he promise? He said anyone who believes in him would never perish (would never be eternally lost) but would have eternal life (life that continues in Heaven after we leave earth and never ends). Would God make a promise like that and then break it? Never!! God’s children are secure in a permanent relationship with him because of the quality of the blood with which he bathed us at our spiritual birth, an agent so powerful that it washes away all our sins, not only the ones we committed before our bath, but also those we will commit afterwards. That’s not hard to comprehend since all our sins were future when Jesus died for us. FORGIVEN! The very word suggests cleanliness, doesn’t it?

Isaiah 61:10 gives me the thought I referred to earlier of being dressed in the righteousness of Christ: *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.* Sounds as if the salvation garments and the robe are quite festive, doesn’t it? As though God were getting us ready for a wedding? That is exactly what is happening! Revelation 19 talks about a wedding supper to take place in eternity after time ends. The bridegroom is Jesus Christ and God’s entire gathered faith family, collectively, is the bride. The fact that God has breathed into us and washed and dressed us means we’ve been invited to that supper; we are part of the bride of Christ! And when the time comes, our lavish God will give us new wedding clothes made of fine linen, bright and clean (19:8)! Oh, how God loves his children! He will not lose a single one of us; we are his forever, right from the moment of our spiritual birth. I totally agree with Paul in the following majestic statement:

*I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38,39).*

One of my friends, after reading this passage aloud to me recently, commented: “Then it’s a done deal!” I concurred. Does it not matter, then, how we live after we become God’s child? Oh, yes it does! I will be writing about that subject shortly.

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What I have just described is the permanent relationship we have with God as a result of being born into his family by faith, by believing in him. It’s hard to know where to stop the subject, one of my favorites. I will just mention a few other points:

- Besides being born, we are also adopted into God’s family, so legally we are his.
- We are engraved on God’s hand, not written with ink that may fade.
- We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. Just as we share in his suffering on earth, so we will share in his glory.
- God takes the initiative in keeping his children, sometimes referred to as sheep. Listen to the words of Jesus from John 10: *My sheep listen to my voice; I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.* We are doubly protected, held in a nail scarred hand and in one in which our name is engraved. (Or should I say triply protected?) Let’s not forget that the Holy Spirit resides within us as a deposit guaranteeing our full salvation!

To those who agree with what I have written, but still think God may brokenheartedly let go of sons or daughters who insist they no longer want to be God’s children, I would say two things:

1. Remember that the love of God surpasses knowledge. We must stop trying to limit his love, even a little bit, realizing that God IS love. What that fully means, we can only guess. In the Romans 8 passage I quoted, I believe the phrase *nor anything else in all creation* means that even we cannot separate ourselves from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2. Sometimes God tells his children “No!” If this hypothetical situation ever did take place, I can hear my Lord saying, “No, my child, you may not go. I have bought you with a price; you are mine forever.”

– August - September, 2006

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So far in this essay I have been talking about the cleansing that brings us into RELATIONSHIP with God, stressing the permanence of this “bath.” Now I want to address the constant cleansing that believers need in order to maintain our FELLOWSHIP, our COMMUNION, our FRIENDSHIP with God. This is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter that those who have had a spiritual bath must now be careful to keep their feet clean. This is also what I was referring to when I said Yes, it does matter how we live. The agent for cleansing dirty feet is the same as for our initial bath: the blood of Jesus. Our part is to come to Jesus regularly for the foot washing he offers. And, as Jesus said, we ought to wash one another’s feet as well.

Again we can benefit from looking at physical development in order to understand spiritual matters. At some point, if all is normal, children are expected to take an active part in keeping themselves clean. Leo and I placed by the bathroom sink a wooden stool that had a carousel painted on it along with this saying: “Wash face and hands and do it well when you step on this carousel.” We taught our five children to do just that, step one in a lifelong process of keeping clean. We provided the ingredients for cleansing: water, soap, towels, washcloths, shampoo, toothbrushes – all that was needed. We continued to assist, train and remind until our children could handle personal hygiene themselves.

It is so easy to understand that our children remain ours, whether they are clean or dirty. Equally clear is the fact that dirt needs to be dealt with as it arises: “Go wash your face and hands and change your shirt. Then you may come to the dinner table.” If the child obeys, all is well. But what if the child disobeys, preferring to remain dirty? While the relationship is unbroken, tension develops that disrupts the tranquility of the family. Resolution is needed for peace to be restored, and the sooner, the better.

With God, there are always eternal and “meanwhile down here on earth” components to any subject we might consider, such as this one on cleanliness. Though eternally clean when we are born into God’s family, we retain the potential for getting dirty (sinning). Hence we are given by our heavenly parent all sorts of equipment to maintain down here on earth the cleanliness we have at the moment of our new birth. All we have to do is USE the equipment. Peter puts it this way:

*[God’s] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:3,4).*

In the first sentence of this passage, I think of “life” as our eternal salvation and “godliness” as the standard of living we are expected to embrace and exhibit between our new birth and our leaving this earth for Heaven. Peter is very clear that God has given us EVERYTHING WE NEED for living godly lives. It really IS possible to escape the corruption that stains the world. If we do sin after we are believers, be assured of this: our failure is NOT God’s fault!

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Here is a list of some of the “equipment” God gives his children to help them remain clean:

– *God's indwelling presence.* God lives in us by his Holy Spirit and surely leads us in paths of righteousness. Our part is to follow where he leads.

– *A conscience.* Though everyone has a conscience, new believers have consciences that are especially tender toward God. Our part is to keep them tender through obedience. A pattern of willful disobedience can make consciences practically inoperable.

– *Prayer.* God has made a way for us to talk with him anytime, any place and in any situation, using ordinary words. If words fail us for some reason, the Holy Spirit will translate our groans for us. If we practice talking everything over with God, even the things we can't discuss with anyone else, and then listening to his reply (also a part of prayer), we are well on our way to keeping clean.

– *The Bible.* This marvelous Book, regularly read with a proper respect for its Author, is a powerful cleansing agent, even if we do not understand all of it. Once I heard of a missionary who tried to instruct an illiterate convert by reading to her from the Bible every day. The convert had difficulty retaining information, however. One day the frustrated missionary said, "I don't see why we should continue these sessions since you don't remember from one day to the next what I have read to you!" The convert replied, "But I feel so CLEAN at the end of your readings!"

– *The example of Jesus.* Peter said God has given us what we need for living godly lives by our knowledge of Jesus. We find out all about his glory and goodness in the Bible, especially in the gospels. Jesus faced all the types of temptations we face, without sinning. The more we learn of him, the more we make Jesus our role model, the more Christ-like (clean) we will be.

– *An advocate.* I love these verses: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins ... (1 John 2:1,2a).* John believed it was possible for God's children not to sin. Perhaps thinking it a sign of humility, I have heard Christians in leadership say they sin many times every day. My question is, "Why?" I think it is possible to go long stretches of time without sinning. BUT IF, John goes on, telling about an advocate, a defense attorney, a lawyer, who springs into action on our behalf – Jesus, the same one who died for our sins. This makes you want to stay clean, doesn't it?

– *Ways of escape.* 1 Corinthians 10:13 contains two of God's great promises: *No temptation has seized you except what is common among people. And God is faithful; (1) he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But (2) when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* The first promise is so often misapplied to the burdens, trials and hardships of life, when the subject here is temptation to do wrong, to get dirty. How comforting it is to know that God is present and actively involved in these critical times! I can testify personally that God really does provide ways of escape at just the right moment. Our job is to take the escape route when it appears and to marvel at God's provision.

– *Churches.* All God's children are members of the universal Church, a spiritual building of which Jesus is the Cornerstone. In addition God wants us to gather together in local congregations. Among other things, active participation in a local church brings us out in the open where we are more accountable for our actions. Also, being among others who desire to keep clean strengthens our resolve to live lives that honor our God and our group. And it is there that we can wash one another's feet. No wonder the Bible tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together!

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With all this in place, we still fail, every one of us. John says in a letter to believers: *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8).* The very next verse tells us what to do if we do sin, a verse so important that it bears repeating in this essay: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).* This is another of God's great and faithful promises that are scattered throughout the Bible for our finding.

I want to use the third chapter of Colossians as an outline for the rest of this essay, for in it Paul tells us how to live clean, righteous, holy, godly lives. He begins by stating some tremendous, basic facts about our Savior and our salvation, truths that should be the focus of our hearts and minds:

*Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

Isn't that magnificent? We have been raised with Christ, Christ is our life now and our future with him is glorious! CERTAINLY that should have an effect on our behavior, as Paul states (notice the word "therefore"):

*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.*

The new, spiritual nature that we receive when we put our trust in Jesus does not eliminate our old, earthly nature. Rather, the two coexist all the rest of our time on earth. When something from our earthly nature begins to stir in us, tempting us to wallow in the mud, Paul uses aggressive language in telling us how to react: PUT IT TO DEATH, he says. (The picture in my mind as I write this is of Grandma Hicks beating a snake to death in the front yard of my childhood home. Never again would that snake frighten Grandma's family!)

Do you agree that the items on Paul's list have no place in a believer's life? Would you say such things are rare in the Church? How happy we were in the late 1960s when a Christian family, with children the age of ours, moved into our neighborhood! We had many good times together. A few years later the wife came to me with news I could hardly believe: her husband had left her! At the time I didn't know any faith families that were marred by separation or divorce. That summer my friend brought me more shocking news: a missionary couple we both knew was in the same situation! Each of these men had found another woman to love and, instead of taking the way out of temptation, divorced their wives, left their children and married the other women.

Thirty-five years later the shock, sadly, is gone as sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed are almost as rampant among believers as among the general population. Wives leave their husbands for other men, as well as vice versa. Collectively, God's faith family (in the United States, at least) has very dirty feet and is seriously in need of cleansing. Do we no longer fear the wrath of God that is coming because of these things? God has certainly done his part; now we must resolve to put to death these common infractions of God's holiness when they crop up in our lives. And we must help others do the same.

Assuming that the obvious sins had been handled, Paul now mentions a second tier of behaviors that the believers had to face and conquer:

*But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

I like the imagery Paul includes with this list. "Old self" is synonymous with "earthly nature," while "new self" is the spiritual nature God gives to each of his children. I picture the old self as an old jacket with lumpy bulges in the various pockets made by inappropriate behaviors. Now I have a beautiful new jacket that doesn't fit correctly over my other one. So I remove my old garment and discard it, along with all the things in the pockets. My new jacket fits so well now and is beautiful, a real credit to its Creator. I wouldn't want to spoil it by filling its pockets with the bulky things I used to carry around!

Again I ask the same questions as before: Do you agree that the things on Paul's second list have no place in the lives of believers? Would you say such things are rare in the Church? I imagine we would concur that they are not rare at all. Personally, I have been increasingly distressed by the filthy language I hear coming from the lips of believers, so I am going to concentrate on that subject for the remainder of this essay. First some related verses about our speech:

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen (Ephesians 4:29).*

*Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or course joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving (Ephesians 5:3,4).*

*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be (James 3:9,10).*

*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name (Exodus 20:7).*

The attitude of our culture toward obscenity and vulgar talking certainly has changed since the 1940s, the decade where I spent a major portion of my childhood. Of course there were people then for whom swearing was easy and became part of what defined them, but generally our society tried to protect children (and even "ladies"! ) from these words. There were strict standards about what could be said in movies, on the radio and on early television. The expressions that handled our emotions then seem so mild – and refreshing! – when I hear the old shows now on tapes or on TV: "gee whiz," "jeeppers," "my goodness," and the like. Back then mothers threatened to wash out their children's mouths with soap if they used curse words, and some of them carried out their threats!

I was doubly protected from foul language in childhood: my family did not swear and our church taught that swearing was a sin against God, bringing with it the threat of hell. I remember a discussion in my junior high school Sunday School class as to whether Christians should even use the phrase "my goodness." Nora, our teacher, had heard that the word "goodness" might be a corrupt form of "God." We certainly did not want to break one of the ten commandments!

So many believers I know are careless (in my opinion) in their use of the name of God in ordinary conversation. They say, for example, "God, it was awful!" or "Oh, my God!" routinely, obviously seeing nothing wrong with that. I keep quiet, but inside I wonder about such things. Here at Sky View we have a very large staff coming from many countries and all sorts of cultures. It's interesting! Quite a few of them express their faith in the Lord Jesus while with me, and these times become moments of worship and fellowship that I cherish. They are my brothers and sisters, and I'm glad to know them. I have been with some of them when something suddenly went wrong or they got a disturbing piece of news. The first thing out of their mouths was the beautiful name of Jesus Christ, but this time spit out with such venom, such disgust and anger. How sad! I can surely say with James, this should not be! (By the way, this is a widespread problem, not unique to Sky View! And some staff members here do NOT use God's name carelessly.)

I remember so well the first time a swear word came out of my mouth. I was a freshman in college, living in a dormitory among girls who routinely used words that made me cringe. One night, in a moment of frustration, I said one of those words. How guilty, how DIRTY I felt – and rightly so! That turned out to be an isolated incident, for swearing never became a habit with me, but it has proved to be so instructive and beneficial in my life that I believe God allowed it as part of my training for his service. For example, years later I was with a teenage boy when that very same word passed through HIS lips for the first time. He was just as devastated as I had been! With tears in his eyes, he said, "I knew that some day I would say that word. I hear it all the time at school!" How my heart went out to him! I understood completely, hence did not add to his guilt by any sort of condemnation. His attitude made him a wonderful candidate for God's forgiveness.



I thought of Isaiah who, after seeing a spectacular vision of our holy God as recorded in Isaiah 6, said, *“Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”* Isaiah goes on to tell of his cleansing: *Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”* Isaiah was then ready for assignment by God and he served the Lord well for many years.

The use of filthy language by God’s people is nothing new, for the people among whom Isaiah lived were Israelites. And the verses I have quoted from the pens of James and Paul were written to Christian churches, not to the general population. No, the problem is not new, nor is it superficial. All the coarse, dirty, unprofitable talk that believers engage in today is a symptom that our minds and hearts are unclean. Paul told the Colossians to set their hearts and minds on things above, not on earthly things. To the Philippians he was more specific: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things (Philippians 4:8).* If all God’s family members followed these instructions, filthy language would disappear among us, for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

As Paul continues in his letter to the Colossians, another point becomes clear: we are not meant to put to death and get rid of our bad habits and sinful ways so that we will be clean but EMPTY. That is actually a dangerous condition. Instead we are to take on a new set of characteristics, habits and actions so the old ways have no room to come back, even if they want to. Paul uses the phrases “clothe yourselves” and “put on” to describe our part in the transformation of our lives. Think of the “new jacket” I mentioned before. We are invited to FILL its pockets with all sorts of virtues, good deeds and valuable practices, and the jacket, rather than looking bulky and shabby, will become more beautiful with each addition. Here are Paul’s words, Colossians 3:12-17:

*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

What a life! We have been called to such a rich, fulfilling, interactive, purposeful, CLEAN life God has in mind for us! I’ve made my choice – that’s the life for me!

\* \* \* \* \*

I know a family who concludes their morning devotions around the breakfast table with the prayer of David from Psalm 19:14. A few times I was privileged to be with them for this ceremony, which obviously impressed me greatly. Just now I took a fresh look at Psalm 19 to see what came before this well-known verse which says, *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.* For the first eleven verses David gives high praise to God, whom he knew personally as his Rock and his Redeemer. He begins his poem with very creative thoughts about how the heavens, particularly the sun, declare the glory of God. Then he began to write about the law – the statutes, precepts, commands, the ordinances – of the Lord, calling them perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, more precious than gold, sweeter than honey. David was emotionally involved in what he was writing. He says, *By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.* How much meditation must have preceded the writing of this psalm! And how much worship must have poured forth

as all those marvelous thoughts within David were turned into words on paper!

What was the result? David was driven to his knees by a great desire to be clean before God. Listen to verses 12 and 13: *Who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.* Having received God's forgiveness, he then concluded his prayer and his poem with verse 14, the one my friends use at their breakfast table. David wanted to be clean inside and out. I do, too.

There's a time to begin writing and a time to stop. I want to conclude my essay the way David ended Psalm 19. If you share his desire, let's join hands around our "breakfast table" and pray together:

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF MY HEART  
BE PLEASING IN YOUR SIGHT, O LORD, MY ROCK AND MY REDEEMER. AMEN.

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