

Text: Jas 5.12

Time for another "Ask the Pastor" message:

"Heavens to Betsy" and other sayings

This comes from a question: What does 'Heavens to Betsy' mean? & is it okay for us to say that?

The expression falls in the category of "minced oaths," that is:

A **minced oath** is a euphemistic expression formed by deliberately misspelling, mispronouncing, or replacing a part of a profane, blasphemous, or taboo word or phrase to reduce the original term's objectionable characteristics. An example is "gosh" for "God".¹

Before we get to "heavens to Betsy" let's take a look at the Scripture about oaths and work our way from the Scripture to how we should think about this.

Read James 5.12

Jas 5.12 ¶ But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

This is related to a couple of other passages at least:

Mt 5.33-37 ¶ "Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.'³⁴ "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING.³⁶ "Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil.

Ex 20.7 ¶ "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.

¹ "Minced Oath," in *Wikipedia*, May 11, 2023,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Minced_oath&oldid=1154238932.

Most people think little of the profanity they fill the air with. Most Christians know we shouldn't say such things, based on the passages we just read.

However, over time, less shocking substitutes for profanity entered our language, as a way of expressing emotions without actually saying "the very bad word."

Minced oaths are kind of a legalistic way of avoiding doing something clearly wrong.

So let's think about what the Bible is saying to us for our understanding.

I. God clearly prohibits some speech

A. Taking God's name in vain

1. God's name is holy, sacred, and should not be profaned
2. To take God's name in vain is to make God's name common, a mere swear word
3. The Bible clearly prohibits this

B. Uttering oaths

1. We don't mean a formal oath or vow such as God legislated in the OT
2. We mean when someone wants to emphasize his intensity or wrath or truthfulness
 - a. The examples Jesus gave
 - 1) I swear by God's throne I will do what I say
 - 2) I swear by heaven that I'm telling the truth
 - b. Jesus [and James] clearly forbade this kind of swearing

II. Biblical principles derived from the prohibition make some words problematic

A. Profanity

Profanity ... is a socially offensive use of language. Accordingly, profanity is language use that is sometimes deemed rude, obscene, or culturally offensive; in certain religions, it constitutes sin. It can show a debasement of someone or something, or be considered an expression of strong feeling

towards something. Some words may also be used as intensifiers.

This term derives from the older, more literal, sense of "profanity." This refers to a lack of respect for things that are held to be sacred, which implies anything inspiring or deserving of reverence, as well as behaviour showing similar disrespect or causing religious offense.²

1. "To profane" something is to "make it common" – make something sacred into an ordinary thing.
2. To speak of taboo things (scatology) makes something private public and common — it shows disrespect
3. Using profanity isn't the same as taking God's name in vain, but taking God's name in vain is a kind of profanity
4. Consequently, profanity is considered sin by Christians

B. Minced oaths

1. Minced oaths are substitutes for either profane words or God's name
2. There are many expressions that are said to be minced oaths, but be careful
 - a. Gosh for God or Gee for Jesus are commonly understood
 - b. Heck for hell is another

I'm not going to give you any more, you probably know plenty.

3. Should Christians use minced oaths?
 - a. If the minced oath is clearly a substitute for God's name, no
 - b. If the minced oath clearly is only mild profanity, no ("heck" for instance)

² "Profanity," in *Wikipedia*, May 13, 2023,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Profanity&oldid=1154553488>.

III. What about how language changes?

A. Some minced oaths *over time* lose their connection with the original word

1. Word meanings change and we don't have any control over it

You would never say of a little kid these days, "he or she has such a gay spirit"

2. Words lose their connection with their past

B. Some expressions never had a connection to anything profane, but some people think they do

"bloody" for example, never was considered profane until some objected, but the history shows the objection is false

C. Some supposed connections between supposed minced oaths are made up on the internet (you can't trust everything you read on the internet)

Conclusion:

We are quite clear about taking God's name in vain and making oaths (though this is more of an archaic practice).

We hear minced oaths and on the same principles realize we shouldn't use them.

We also have to recognize that our own perception of some expressions could be incorrect — we shouldn't be judgemental when others use them.

What about "Heavens to Betsy" then?

- This is an interjection that shows surprise.
- The origins of this expression are unclear. It may have originated sometime between the years 1850 and 1914.
- Heavens to Betsy is another variation of the phrase for Heaven's sake, which began as a euphemism for what some considered the blasphemous for God's sake and for Christ's sake.
- Nowadays, most people consider *heavens to Betsy* to be old fashioned, and it is not common to use or hear it.

Should you say it? If you want to sound old-fashioned, maybe!

It would be best if we could keep our language free of all clutter like this, but I don't think we will ever succeed.

The important thing here is to develop your own walk with the Lord and allow others the room to grow ... without taking the role of the Holy Spirit to help them grow.