

“Sincerely Serious about God”
The Ten Commandments Series, No. 4
Exodus 20:1-7
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Text Comment

v.7 The question is asked: why does this commandment, in particular, have attached to it such a warning. Most of most of the other commandments do not. Several things may be said. First, it follows a still more elaborate warning in the previous commandment; so, this is not the only such warning in the Ten Commandments. Second, there is a promise attached to both the second commandment and the fifth. In other words, since every commandment is not furnished with either warning or promise, but they are scattered through the first five commandments, it seems likely that both the promises and the warnings should be understood to be attached to *all the commandments*, not just the second, third, and fifth. Third, it may be that this was a commandment the Lord thought the violation of which to be particularly widespread. After all, there are people who, at least in an outward way, are respectful of their parents, have never stolen property from their neighbor, and have never committed adultery, but, as we will see, everyone all the time takes the Lord’s name in vain almost all the time. And, remember, when the Ten Commandments were first given, it was to the wilderness generation, not, alas, the most sincerely faithful generation of God’s people.

What’s in a name? So the old saying goes. The implication of the question is that a name is of no great consequence. It is only a label, a word; it is not the thing in itself. It is not the person. If I call her Elizabeth, Beth, Liz, or Lizzie, she is still the same person. It is the person who matters. This is Juliet’s point when she asks: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

I sometimes tease my wife and sing to her the love song from *West Side Story*. “The most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard, *Florence, Florence, Florence!* All the beautiful sounds of the world in a single word, *Florence, Florence, Florence.*” It doesn’t have quite the same ring to it. But, then, if both of us agree that “Florence” doesn’t sing as well as “Maria,” if hers isn’t as pretty a name, I don’t love her any less. She has glorified her name in my mind and heart. The woman I love will always be Florence to me! What’s in a name?

Or, perhaps in our day of marketing, “What’s in a name?” may suggest that there is no reason to pay double or treble for a purse when you can buy a knock-off that looks almost identical and often has a monogram or logo that is virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. Do I really want to pay an extra \$250 for the word *Prada* on my bag, when I can buy one that has *Prado* in similar lettering and looks the same? I drive a Hyundai and the “H” on a Hyundai is made to look very much like the “H” on a Honda. But I spent thousands less for my Hyundai than I would have had to pay for a comparable Honda. What’s in a name?

It is easy enough to think such things *unless the name we are thinking about and talking about is ours!* Prada, for example, cares a great deal about its name! Goes to court again and again to protect its name. And so do you; you care a great deal about *your name*. We understand instinctively and immediately that when *our name* is used, *we ourselves* are being taken up into someone else's mind and conversation and judgment. When you hear someone else mention *your name*, you know that he or she is not talking about a mere word, he or she is talking *about you*. He or she has, as it were, taken you up – body and soul – into his or her mind and onto his or her lips. You want to know what he said about *you*. You want to know what she thinks about *you*. You are suddenly all ears! There is a lot in a name!

But in the Bible, there is even more significance attached to a name. In the ancient world people associated a person's name with the person himself or herself. More than we do. The name was thought to convey the essence, character, or presence of the person. That is why there are so many references to God's *name* in the Bible. Indeed, sometimes the word "Name" is used as a substitute for the Lord's actual name. Sometimes the Lord is referred to simply as "*the Name*." We are commanded to hallow God's name, to believe in his name, to remember God's name. Of course, what is meant is that we are to hallow God, believe in Yahweh, and remember him. The temple was built for God's name; Isaiah speaks of the Name of the Lord coming instead of simply the Lord coming, and so on.

In a similar way, divine judgment is said to consist in cutting off, or blotting out, or destroying one's name. In other words, the name of a person *is that person, at least as he has been revealed or been made known*. The name is what is known about a person. As you can see, there was in the ancient near east a more thorough identification of the person with his or her name than is common today. In place after place in the Bible the Lord's name is associated with his righteousness, his faithfulness, his mercy, his truth, his holiness, his love, and so on. God's name, in other words, is a description of his nature, of not only *who* but *what* he is. And so, the worshipper in the Psalms "declares the name of the Lord." [cf. *NBD*] Because you are declaring the name of the Lord, you're declaring him and everything you know about him and everything you understand him to be.

It is for this same reason that people were given names that were thought to reflect something about the circumstances of that person's birth, or his calling, or his character. Think, for example, of the names that Leah and Rachel gave to their sons; each name tells a tale. This is the reason why personal names were sometimes changed to indicate new developments in a person's life. Think of Abram becoming Abraham or Simon becoming Peter. People were expected to live up to their names. This is why the Lord revealed his personal name, Yahweh, to Israel only once there was a nation in covenant with him. It was time for Israel to know the Lord as Yahweh, the infinite personal God who had loved and chosen Israel to be his own people.

So, here is the first thing to know about the 3rd Commandment. When it says not to take the Lord's *name* in vain, it means you are not to take *God himself* in vain; you are not to take the Lord, Yahweh, in vain. To abuse his name is to abuse him; to show disrespect to his name is to show disrespect to him.

But what does it mean to take the Lord's name *in vain*? Well the prepositional phrase here translated "in vain" is literally "for vanity." The noun itself means "worthlessness" or "emptiness" or "nothingness" or "falsehood." In the phrase we have here and elsewhere it is usually translated as it is here: "in vain" or "to no avail." The word refers to anything that is insubstantial, worthless, or unreal. Consider these uses of the word elsewhere in the Bible.

1. In Psalm 24:4, for example, it is virtually a synonym for an idol, a false or unreal god. "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?" The answer is: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to *what is false*." "What is false" is our word "vanity."
2. In Ezekiel (13:23) the visions of the false prophets are said to be false or unreal. Same word.

The word is broad enough in its implication to cover all manner of misuse of the Lord's name. Much later the Jews famously refused to pronounce the name of the Lord, Yahweh, and substituted the title "Lord" instead. The thinking was that one could not misuse the Lord's name if he or she never spoke it. That, of course, entirely fails to grasp the nettle of the commandment. It forbids profane use of the Lord's name, of course, using his name as a punchline or in jest, and certainly it prohibits the failure to keep a promise made solemnly in the Lord's name, as might a witness in court who lies on the stand after having promised to tell the truth *so help me God*. But the term is fairly understood to mean that the commandment forbids any lack of seriousness about God's presence, character, Word, or works. [cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 287-288] One Jewish commentator translates the commandment; "'You shall not take the name of the Lord your God for unreality...'" [Cassuto, 243] In other words, you must never speak or act *as if God isn't there or isn't the God he is!*

Now, suddenly, the third commandment is an entirely different thing! Because we all act, even the most devout among us, all too often as if God were not there or were not who and what he is. You can take the name of the Lord your God in vain singing a hymn to him in church or reciting the creed along with the congregation if, in your heart, it is as if he were not there, doing what you are doing without real thought or intention or sincerity. You can take the Lord's name in vain when you pretend to be at prayer, pretend to be speaking to God, but, all the while, your thoughts are a million miles away. In fact, whether we are talking about liberal churches that have little actual loyalty to the Bible or conservative churches that trumpet their loyalty to the Bible, the Lord's name is taken in vain in all of them every Sunday. Is it not so? Do we not take the Lord's name on to our lips time and time again with little thought of what we are saying or of the one to whom we are speaking? How many times and in how many ways have we not taken God seriously!

The great Puritan theologian Thomas Watson, in his exposition of the Ten Commandments, goes on for pages with main points and sub-points listing all the ways we can take the name of the Lord in vain. Let me give you a taste:

1. When we speak slightly and irreverently of his name.
2. When we profess God's name but do not live answerably to it.
3. When we worship him with our lips but not with our hearts.

4. When we pray but do not believe.
5. When we misuse his Word. And on and on in goes.

We take God's name in vain, obviously, when we use his name as a casual interjection, as many people do. The names "God," "Jesus," "Christ," or "Jesus Christ" fill up the speech of many people who have no thought whatsoever of the majesty, holiness, justice, or presence of the Living God. The now virtually universal interjection of the American young person, "Oh my God!" now so common as to be represented in text-speak as OMG, is an obvious case in point. Who is really thinking of God who blurts out, "Oh my God?" Are any of you still guilty of this way of breaking the 3rd Commandment? I hope not! But that sort of violation is only the crudest and most obvious version of this sin and, truth be told, the easiest to eliminate from our behavior. I never use the Lord's name in vain that way and I'm sure there are good many of you who never do either. But that is not at all to say that I keep the 3rd Commandment!

How much pretense, how much pretending, how much insincerity, how much lack of seriousness there is in my Christian life! How much hypocrisy can be found in my Christian life! How many times do I act outwardly but not inwardly? How much unreality is there in my confession of faith in God? I shudder even to consider the questions. Virtually all the authorities agree that *all forms of hypocrisy*, great and small, are violations of the 3rd Commandment.

Let the man or woman here who *always* speaks to God and about God, who *always* prays to God, who *always* reads the Word of God with a lively sense of the presence of the Majesty on High, with reverence, love, sincerity, true faith, and expectation; I say, let that man or woman come forward. And let him or her be joined by those who never hear or see God's name be belittled, or abused, or blasphemed without suffering the shame or it and the horror of it himself or herself.

I am not reaching here, am I? I am not describing what we cannot understand or asking for the impossible, am I? The reality of God is so tremendous, so wonderful, so terrifying that to belittle him, to treat him as a little thing, or as nothing, is preposterous. Inexcusable! We know well enough not to do this many times; so why not at all times? This refusing to take God seriously is, no doubt, a defense mechanism for sinful human beings. By making little of the name of God, by filling up our speech with that name while thinking little of it, we keep God's name at bay; we comfort ourselves with the thought that God is familiar, more like us, not so great that we must fear him.

In fact, in all this practice of human beings using God's name in vain there is an argument for the reality of biblical revelation. Why does no one take Thor's name in vain, or Baal's, or Amun's; or, for that matter, Buddha's? It is because those names have no real power. They are not substantial enough to blaspheme. Blasphemy is an effect; it requires a name the violation of which amounts to something, requires the hearer to sit up and take notice, have some shock effect. Otherwise, what is the point?

Take, for example, the common use of "hell," a word that in the teaching of the Word of God is that terrible prospect, that awful place, and that repugnant condition of human existence that the entire world has learned only from the Christian Scriptures. What the world understands by hell

is the hell that is found in the Bible and no place else. “Hell of a good time,” “What the hell,” “Go to hell,” and so on, represent, in effect, the same lack of seriousness about God. Everyone knows what hell is; what it is supposed to be. Indeed, surveys indicate that most Americans still believe hell exists, even if they rarely consider the possibility of their going there themselves. It is precisely the sinister nature of hell, and its looming reality that no one can entirely shake, that makes it useful as profanity, a curse, or an expletive. Why does no one say, “What the Puyallup!” Or “Go to Tacoma.” But the casual use of that terrible word “hell,” its constant appearance in ordinary conversation, its insincere and mundane usage, serves to hold its terrifying reality at bay.

Experiences of God’s name and of taking it with terrible seriousness litter the pages of Holy Scripture to teach us both how great is God’s name and what it means to revere that name. God’s people have always had experiences with God that have given his name terrible and wonderful power in their hearts or have made his name beautiful beyond words. When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up in the temple, saw the six-winged seraphim hovering above his shoulders, heard them cry to one another “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and felt the foundations of the temple shake, Isaiah fell to his face before the Lord and poured out his soul in the confession of his sins because, as he said, he had seen Yahweh, heard his name spoken by angels. Now Yahweh’s name would never be the same to him.

Or consider Peter on the occasion of the great catch of fish. The experience of the Lord’s terrible power caused Peter to fall at Jesus’ feet and cry out, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” What name Peter may have used on that occasion we do not know – obviously they were not speaking Greek to one another – but even if it were the Aramaic equivalent of “Lord,” Peter had never used the name or title with such reverence before.

And so it is with us. The simple fact, as any Christian will confess, is that if God were visibly present with us, if Jesus Christ in his ascended glory were visibly present to us, if we could see or feel his glory, his name would never be a punchline in our speech, we would never turn to him in prayer and think only of other things, we would never read his Word with indifference, doing little more than skimming it so as to be able to check the box or fill the square; to be able to say that we had done it. This is why we pray, in the Lord’s Prayer, as we did this morning, “Lord, hallowed be thy name.” We understand that the Lord’s name ought to be sacred to every human being, and all the more to every child of God. We ought to love that name, admire it, worship it, live by it, and live for it every moment of every day. It is simply the greatest name of all, the name above every name, the name before which every knee will someday bow and every tongue confess that *He* is the King of Kings. And so what Christian would ever deny that *that* name should always be a power in the Christian heart!

Nowadays it is quite common to hear of someone who is “angry at God.” Some great sadness has overshadowed his life, she has met with some cruel disappointment, and he or she is angry with God. Fair enough. We know all too well how people can struggle to come to terms with the Lord’s sovereign will. We are given many examples of just that struggle – though more reverent – in the prayers of the Psalms. We are easily tempted to think that God should have done something other than what he did. We get that. We can understand that. We can even sympathize with that, because we have felt the same way ourselves. But at the same time, what Christian

does not understand that anger at God, resentment over what God has done is a case of taking the name of the Lord in vain. No one who is angry at God, can be taking the Lord seriously. No one who is angry at God can at the same time confess his perfect wisdom, his infinite love, his sovereign rule, his exact justice. To be angry at God is to deny something, perhaps many things that God has revealed to us about himself. To be angry at God is to deny his name and the nature and character that his name reveals. No one would remain angry with Yahweh for a moment if only he could see his glory or hear his praise being sung in heaven or feel the warmth of his presence.

So, do you see how essential it is that we keep in our hearts and minds a true sight of God, that we remember his name? No one will keep the third commandment; no one ever has who does not think often and seriously about God, who does not remember what God is like, what God has said about himself, and what God has done to prove himself to us and to all mankind. Is this not what makes the Bible so fundamental to the Christian mind, heart, and life? It is the revelation of God, it is how we become acquainted with his name.

The Lord's name *Yahweh*, by one count, occurs 6,828 times in the Old Testament. His other name, *Elohim*, God, occurs another 2,600 times. The name *Jesus* appears just under a thousand times in the New Testament, *Christ* some 555 times, and *Jesus Christ* together 195 times. The Bible is supremely a revelation of the names of God, of his name. So, when we are told not to take his name in vain, we are being told to take with the greatest seriousness what we have been taught about Yahweh and about Jesus Christ. The person who knows who the Lord is, the person who reveres his name is the person whom God approves.

Helmut Thielicke, the 20th century German theologian, sometimes known as the Billy Graham of Germany, once described the *disease* of theologians as the tendency to begin thinking about God in the third person, not the second. That is, they begin to think about God abstractly, as a subject rather than as their own God and savior, as the person whose name they know and whom they address by name. They come to think and speak and write more *about* God than speak *to* God. They cease to revere his name! Or, in other words, the disease of theologians is precisely that they begin to take the Lord's name in vain. And many people in the Christian church do the very same thing, and all of us to one extent or another do this as well.

What does the 3rd commandment require of us? True, sincere, reverent, grateful, and happy thoughts about God and attitudes and convictions and then behavior in keeping with whom we know the Lord to be. Right thoughts and right words about God and right worship and right living in keeping with that worship. What's in a name? When did you last ask yourself what is in God's name?

Augustine in his *Confessions* asks this very question, a question you and I ought to ask and answer again and again and again, and probably, in short form, at least once every single day. Here is Augustine.

“What...is my God? What I ask, but the Lord God? For who is Lord but the Lord? Or who is God besides our God. O You supreme, most excellent, most mighty, most omnipotent, most merciful, most just; must secret and most present; most beautiful and

most strong; stable and incomprehensible; immutable yet changing all things; never new and never old...ever active and ever quiet; ...upholding, filling, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and perfecting all things; still seeking though you stand in need of nothing... But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you, because...speaking as often as they do, they have nothing to say.” [Various translations and my own]

What’s in a name? In this name, absolutely everything: the meaning of life and all our hopes for this world and for that which is to come! What the 3rd commandment forbids us to do is to stop caring about God, to stop taking God unseriously, the very thing our entire culture now does virtually without a thought all the time.