

The Big Ten: What's In A Name?

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Psalm 79:8-9; James 3:2-12; Exodus 20:1-17

Our final Scripture reading tonight is from Exodus 20:1-17. I invite you to turn their in your Bibles and mark it since we'll be there the next several weeks. I also encourage you to pull out the handout from your bulletin to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.""

"Our chicken is worthy of the Jets' name." That phrase stuck out to me this week when I got the ads out of the mailbox on Wednesday. I don't look for pizza coupons any more, but it was just funny. "Our chicken is worthy of the Jets' name." I knew immediately what it meant. Back when I ate a lot of pizza, I ate a lot of Jets' pizza. When I was coming home from our Presbytery meeting in Indianapolis last weekend with my good friend and fellow pastor Jim Rizer, he said, "I don't remember you talking about food too much before you changed your diet – but I do remember when you were all excited about Jets' 8 Corner Pizza." Maybe you don't have the same opinion of Jets, but up in this corner of Michigan, they've got name recognition.

Names speak to us about reputation. We may have never met someone, but we often have heard the name. Probably none of us has had a face-to-face chat with a president, but I don't even have to give you a first name – all I have to give you is Obama or Bush or Clinton or Reagan, and you have an opinion and a reputation in your head. In today's world, when somebody says I'm going to the Apple store, they mean something a whole lot different than someone going to pick apples even thirty years ago. We buy products – or avoid them! – based on the name brand. You can go into a store like Aldi and buy food that's exactly the same as what you'll find at Kroger or Meijer for a lot less – but you pay less because you can't know for certain it will taste just like the name brand you've come to love.

Well, God has a name and a reputation as well, and as we continue our study of the big ten – the Ten Commandments, we’ve reached the third one, which concerns God’s name. Of the ten, this is probably the one that has been the most misunderstood since it was first given. Today we’ll go over the multiple meanings it has and what it means for Christians today.

The third commandment says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” This is not as straightforward as we’ve grown accustomed to believing. Sometimes we’ve made this one into, “Don’t cuss.” But that doesn’t get into what it meant when it was given to the ancient Israelites, and it might actually steer us away from its true intentions.

The very first thing that it meant to the ancient Hebrews was that they were not to swear falsely upon YHWH – the name of the LORD typically represented by LORD in all capital letters in English bibles. At its most basic, it was a command against perjury. In that era, if you had to make a pledge of some sort, what was to keep you from breaking your word, especially to an outsider from outside your tribe or even from outside Israel? You made an oath invoking the name of your god and calling punishments on yourself from that god if you broke it. This was common amongst all the peoples of that region. The Romans in particular took perjury to be the most debased thing a person could do, and they took oaths to their gods very seriously.

However, many people felt that if they made an oath to someone outside their people, it wasn’t binding no matter how they made it. What does God care if I make a pledge to someone from a neighboring Philistine tribe in His name? They’re still Philistines! They are still the enemy! Keeping your word to them – what is that? But God said, “You will not swear by my name in vain.” You will not convince someone that you are being truthful by using my name only to break your promises.

But there’s another meaning to the words here “in vain.” The Hebrew construction literally means “for emptiness” or “for vanity.” Not only are we talking about taking oaths in God’s name, we’re talking about uses of God’s name with no purpose or meaning. His name was to be revered as sacred and holy. Any other use would break this command.

By the 6th century BC, the Hebrews took this command extremely literally, and it created what you might call a loophole. No one ever said the name of God. You would never hear anyone even try to figure out how to say the name we pronounce now (probably wrongly) as Yahweh. They saw the letters YHWH and they pronounced it “Adonai” – which means “lord” in Hebrew. Problem solved, right? You couldn’t use God’s true name in vain if no one spoke it. The problem was, that missed the point. No matter what you call God – if you call Him God or YHWH or Adonai or anything else in any language – He demands you take His name seriously.

They missed the point of taking oaths in God’s name, too. Jesus tells us in Matthew 23 that the Jews still took oaths, but they took them by things associated with God – the temple, the altar, even the gold of the temple and the gifts given on the altar. And the rabbis debated if you were bound by any of these oaths...precisely what God told the Israelites to avoid, which was lying in their promises. Jesus eventually taught, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” His brother James repeated it in his letter to the church.

What's interesting is what the Third Word doesn't cover: bad language. There are commands in the Bible about how we use our vocabulary. In Ephesians 4:29, Paul the apostle says that Christians should not engage in "unwholesome talk," and in 5:4, he writes, "[Among you] there shouldn't be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving." The book of Proverbs often condemns "crooked speech." James' letter warns us to use our tongues wisely. The Bible wisely doesn't point out specific words not to use because every language is different, and what might be seen as very offensive in one language might not be at all in another. It's what those words mean in our language that matters. But that's not what the third commandment is about.

To understand the heart of this word for us today, we have to remember something we've picked up on every week through this series: the Ten Commandments are relational. In the original language, they are called the Ten Words of God. They are meant to help us build a relationship with God and grow into it. They aren't laws in the conventional sense. There are laws in our court system about perjury; that's what took down Kwame Kilpatrick in Detroit. But the first several Commandments are directly about our relationship with God. The laws we have flow out of our relationship to the One who made us. So as we look to practice the Third Word, we should do it in light of our bond with God.

The first way we honor God through the Third Commandment today is to reclaim the seriousness and holiness of His name and His presence in our everyday lives. Our modern society defaults to using God's name in vain. We react in anger over something and damn it, not even considering the seriousness of what it is for something to be cursed to be outside the presence of God. We react in surprise or horror or simple annoyance and we use God's name flippantly. We've so disrespected it that it's just a part of a three-letter abbreviation people use when they're texting. We joke about God and Jesus.

It's also everywhere. Turn on the radio or TV and you'll hear the casual use of God's name regularly. It's not just in R-rated movies or late-night. When I started working on this series, I noticed that I saw it on the news, on the web, in programs meant for those under the age of 10. It is ironic that a society so determined to rid itself of its Christian origins and morality cannot help but invoke God again and again on a daily basis, even if only as a curse. It is difficult for us as Christians not to do it because it's so typical, many people do it unthinkingly.

In comparison, God's name is to be revered. It's not about the letters or whether we call Him God or Jehovah or YHWH. It's what the name stands for. When we say the name "God," we are referring to the only Being who could create the universe – every star, every planet, supernovas and black holes and galaxies and nebula, reaches so vast we aren't even sure the limits of it – and every creature, from the microscopic fish to pachyderms larger than a house and everything in between, and even creatures we cannot see that belong to His heavenly realms.

We are talking about the awesome Father who has established and demolished earthly kingdoms, who has made the impossible possible, who made the tiny nation of Israel into a force to be reckoned with for 3,500 years, who has the entirety of human fate and history in His hands. This is the God who is perfect in every way – all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-glorious, totally just, the embodiment of love, the definition of righteousness and holiness.

This is the Being who is so beyond us that He is at once Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and yet simply the One True God – the Trinity. He not only made the foundations of the world, He is bringing about a new heaven and a new earth. He not only made humanity, He has saved humanity from itself at the cost of His very own Son. This is the One who though beyond us in every conceivable way humbled Himself and made Himself nothing and came to be one of us in Jesus Christ. He is the Glorious Redeemer who will reign in eternity forevermore.

He is infinitely beyond measure, yet He condescends to make us His children and to adopt us into His family. His power is so great that if He were to appear before us with only the tiniest fraction of His glory, we would be so frightened that we could fall over like a stone. Yet He says, “do not be afraid,” and through the blood of Jesus, His own Son, shed for us, He makes a way for us to come into His presence to receive His kindness, grace, and mercy.

When you have this portrait of God in mind, the use of His name in an empty fashion, without meaning or purpose, suddenly becomes unimaginable. Far be it from us to say any name of God without fervent praise and glorious hope and unending honor and deepest respect! We have the opportunity to reclaim God’s name, to make it a shout of joy and redemption, not a curse but a blessing!

We still remember in the schoolyard the names that people would come up with to make fun of our names. For me, it was always “huff and puff and blow your house down.” When anybody says, “Don’t get in a huff,” I say, “Don’t take my name in vain!” If someone on the playground made fun of your mom’s name, that was cause for a knockdown after school. We know how personal our names are to us. How much more should God’s name be honored among His people!

Now this doesn’t mean we pick fights with folks who use God’s name badly. The Ten Commandments, God’s words to us, are for the people of God. They remind us of who we are and the One to whom we belong. We show respect for God by honoring Him with proper speech, using His name only to bring Him glory. If anything, when someone else uses God’s name in vain, instead of arguing about it, it might be an opening to introduce them to God. They may not know God at all to use His name like that – but we have the faithful opportunity to introduce them.

And that brings up the second way we honor God through his commandment – *we honor the commandment as we honor the Name by which we are now known: Christians*. Unlike virtually every other religion, we are known by the name of our Savior and Lord. We were first called Christians in Antioch, a city known for giving everything in the Roman Empire a nickname. It means “little Christs.” It was once meant as a joke. Our brothers and sisters in the early church wore it proudly. In Peter’s first letter, he said, “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

Christian is a great name for us. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20 that as a Christian, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” In 2 Corinthians 5:20, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” What we do, we do in Jesus’ name.

As faithful followers of Jesus, we are to make it known that we belong to Him, that we serve Him as our Savior and obey Him as our Lord. People know who we are. That means that they watch our actions to see what they say. How we act does not only bring honor or dishonor upon us; it brings honor or dishonor on the name of God, to whom we belong.

How we act towards others...how we act towards our family and our spouse...how we choose to spend our free time...how we react when moral dilemmas come our way...how we give of our time and our talents and our resources...what we say...all of these things reflect on Christ because we are Christians. You know what? We don't even have to take an oath in God's name. If we're known as a Christian, that oath is already a part of us. Even if we don't recognize it, the world does.

The apostle Paul got this. In three of his letters, he tells believers to follow his example. In his letters to Timothy and Titus, in advising them how to be pastors over their people, he orders them, "set an example." We are examples to the world of who Christ is and what He is like. We are name bearers. Scripture calls us Christ's ambassadors to this world. That's a heavy responsibility.

And with all the commandments, we recognize we've broken it. Some of us lean towards it in our language; others of us watch our tongues but not our actions and attitudes. But we also remember that we are not the Israelites in the wilderness trying to make sense out of God's ways. We have been claimed by Christ. We who believe have the Holy Spirit. We are led out of darkness into the light, away from using God's name as an empty curse and towards representing His name each and every day.

The first one is easier than we think if we do what Paul said in 2 Corinthians was a characteristic of Christians: "we take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ." We never gain anything by taking the Lord's name in vain. We won't lose friends because of it, and we will gain a greater relationship with God. All we have to do is think about our words before we say them, so that the next time we're shocked or angry or scared, we do something other than use the Lord's name as profanity.

The second one is harder. The very best of us will always come up short in representing God's name to others. But God promises us sanctification – He promises that He is making us more like Him, right here and now, when we trust in Him. We can do it. Again, it simply takes thinking about what we do and then acting rightly upon those godly thoughts. So much of keeping the third commandment is remembering God before everything else, and letting that rule the rest of your actions.

Tonight, if you've never given your life over to God, all of this sounds strange, even silly. But God made you whether you believe in Him or not. One day, there will be a reckoning when we must account for our lives to Him. Don't stay away from Him. He is calling to you to join the family, to learn who He is, and knowing all that He is, to respect and glorify His name. And if you are a part of the family, take heart. The One whose name you are known by, as you revere the glorious Redeemer and His holy name, will make Himself known to you.