

SERMON: Treating God's Name Carelessly

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 20:7

SERIES: **Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives**

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Introduction: In our series on the Ten Commandments we have done an introductory message and then spent two weeks on the critical issue of idolatry—worshiping other gods and worshiping the true God by use of images. Both are forbidden. Today we come to the Third Commandment, as found in Exodus 20:7: *“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.”*

I suspect some may come to this commandment with the notion that it's all about profanity and swearing, and since you don't do that (or very rarely), you're relaxed and ready to hear the pastor nail those filthy-mouthed guys on the assembly line, or the comedians on late-night TV, or the kid at school who can't utter a sentence without four-letter words.

Well, I humbly suggest that if you are thinking that way, you may not have a real good handle on the Third Commandment. I do believe it has something to say about profanity, but that is probably not the most important focus of it. There are other equally serious ways in which this law of God is violated, even by believers who don't use bad language. And since this commandment is one of only two with specific penalties attached, perhaps we need to pay special attention to it.

The Third Commandment's meaning hinges upon the terms “name” and “misuse.”

Unless we grasp the importance of the Lord's “name,” and unless we understand what amounts to misuse of it, we will not understand this commandment as we should.

Why is the Name of the Lord so important to Him? Well, there is really a pretty simple answer to that question: “Why is your name so important to you?” Why do you feel special when someone you've met only once remembers your name?¹ Or why do you feel demeaned when someone you have known for a long time doesn't remember your name, or worse yet, badmouths your name? The answer to both questions is essentially the same—because your name is your most precious possession.

The story is told about Robert E. Lee, commanding general of the Confederate forces in the Civil War that following the defeat of the South he was left penniless. However, his fame had gone far and wide, and even his enemies had great respect for him. A powerful financial corporation was organizing an insurance company and offered to make Lee the honorary president of the firm. They sent a delegation of persuasive executives to explain to him that he would have no actual duties, even though he would receive a comfortable salary—the kind of gig most politicians today would drool at. What the company really wanted, of course, was Robert E. Lee's name. When they finished outlining all the details, General Lee said simply, but with finality: “Gentlemen, I have nothing left but my name, and that is not for sale!”

But as important as our names are to us, there was something far more profound about names in

biblical times. Most of our names were chosen because they sounded nice to our parents or they were popular names when we were born. Oh, a few people were named after parents or grandparents, but most names serve primarily as identifiers to distinguish us from other kids in the family. It would be really confusing if all the boys in a family had the same name (actually I understand George Foreman did exactly that—each of his five boys is named George (Jr., II, III, IV, and V).

Well, imagine how important your name would be to you if it not only identified you from your siblings but also summed up your character, your personality, or the career path your parents had chosen for you? This was often the case in biblical times. The ancients believed that names should capture the essence of the whole person, and so they did their best to use names to encapsulate what they expected a child to become. While for us names are something we have, for them names were something they were. To know someone's name, then, was to know a lot about them. And sometimes names were changed to indicate a whole new direction in life (examples: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Daniel to Belteshazzar, Saul to Paul)..

God's name is also His most precious possession. He wasn't named by anyone; He named Himself. Through His many names He revealed many different aspects of His character. I have here in my hand a list of over 235 names of the three members of the Trinity found in the Bible. One could do a lifetime of study of this list. Let me mention just a few of God's names as found in the Hebrew Bible.

El Olam tells us He is the eternal and infinite Lord.

El Shaddai speaks of his omnipotence and promise-keeping.

El Elyon says He is the incomparable God, above all.

El Roi indicates that He knows everything and cares about His children.

Adonai that He is sovereign owner of all. We could go on and on.

However, no discussion of God's names would be complete without reference to His favorite name, the name Yahweh. Ancient Hebrew had only consonants, no vowels, and the consonants in Yahweh are YHWH. This name was so sacred to the ancient Jews that they would not pronounce it, and Orthodox Jews to this day will not pronounce it. The KJV pronounced it "Jehovah," but no one actually knows how it should be pronounced. To the best of our knowledge, it should be something like "Yahweh."

There's a fascinating account in Exodus of a conversation that took place shortly before Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, and therefore shortly before the Ten Commandments were given. It was at the end of a 40-year exile to the desert when Moses met God at the burning bush and was given the assignment to return to Egypt and lead the people out of slavery and back to the Promised Land. Moses, however, offered up a number of excuses. One was this (Exodus 3:13): "*Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?' I believe Moses is asking, 'I need to know more about You, so that when I speak of You to the people it will carry weight.'*"

Well, God accommodates Moses by answering in 3:14-15,

“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “The LORD (that’s Yahweh in Hebrew), the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.”

The name Yahweh comes from the present tense of the verb “to be.” It means “I am the One who is,” not who was or who will be, but who is. It also conveys that he is eternal and unchangeable, that He is a covenant-keeper, and that He is self-existent and self-sufficient. We can’t plumb the full depths of this name, but it is clear that the God of the Bible is the only One who deserves the name Yahweh.

Now just a couple of chapters later in Exodus we read that Moses went to Pharaoh and told him to “let my people go.” Pharaoh said “no way!” In fact, he made their slavery even more brutal, to the point that the Israelites turned on Moses, who, in turn, turned to the Lord and complained that his obedience had only produced trouble.

“Then the Lord said to Moses (6:1), ‘Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.

God also said to Moses, “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty (that’s El Shaddai), but by my name the LORD (Yahweh) I did not make myself known to them.”

In other words, here at the time of the Exodus God is revealing a new name for Himself, and therefore new characteristics that His people must grasp and revere. So a few months later when God presented the Ten Commandments, this would have been fresh in the minds of the Israelites. They must not misuse the name of the Lord God. His name is unique because He is unique. It is holy because He is holy.

What does it mean to “misuse” God’s name? All of you are aware that the KJV translated this commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God *in vain*.” Literally it reads, “You shall not lift up the name of the Lord your God for nothingness,” for in Hebrew “in vain” describes that which is empty, idle, insincere and frivolous.ⁱⁱ It implies taking that which is holy and treating it as common. Perhaps the best single-word synonym in English is “to misuse.”

The question is, “How do we misuse the name of God?” What kinds of actions or attitudes are forbidden by the Third Commandment? I want to suggest five prohibitions that I believe flow directly from this Commandment.

The Third Commandment prohibits . . .

The use of God’s name in profanity. I do not believe this is the primary focus of the Third Commandment, but I do believe profanity is forbidden by it, and since this is what people generally think of first, we will deal with it first.

There are many categories of bad language. In a monumental book entitled *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, Rousas John Rushdoony distinguishes between swearing, cursing, profanity,

blasphemy, obscenity, and vulgarity.ⁱⁱⁱ I won't bother you with the various definitions. The fact is, all are bad, and all have become incredibly common in our culture. Language that was once generally thought of as fit only for the proverbial sailor is now commonly heard on TV, in the grocery store, or in the middle school hallway. Many people curse so often that one wonders if they even realize what they're saying. I even had a visitor shake my hand one Sunday and say, "Hell of a good sermon, Pastor." That really set me back for a moment! I didn't know whether to thank him or not.

But the kind of bad language this commandment addresses is the kind that uses the name of the Lord. We would generally call that "profanity" or "blasphemy" because it is profaning something holy. When a person uses the name of God, or of Christ, to curse someone or to swear at some thing, he is without doubt misusing the divine name. God won't damn a person for cutting someone else off on the highway, but it's not uncommon to hear people calling upon Him to do so.

Rushdoony writes about the irony that profanity is championed with evangelical fervor by our sick culture. He tells of a dictionary of slang and profanity that has been widely promoted as an invaluable reference work for high school libraries. He then comments perceptively, "Knowledge of God is barred from the schools, but knowledge of profanity is encouraged," even the kind that misuses God's name!^{iv}

The strange thing about profanity is that there is absolutely no benefit to it. When you get a flat tire and you swear at the tire, does it inflate? When you stub your toe and swear at the couch, does your toe stop hurting? A little clipping I came across illustrates this point with a bit of sarcasm. It is entitled *Ten Reasons Why I Swear*:

1. *It pleases my mother so much.*
2. *It is a fine mark of culture and refinement.*
3. *It proves I have self-control.*
4. *It indicates how clearly my mind works.*
5. *It makes my conversation so pleasant to everyone around me.*
6. *It leaves no doubt in anyone's mind as to my solid upbringing.*
7. *It impresses people that I have more than an ordinary education.*
8. *It makes me an attractive personality around women and children*
9. *It indicates my extensive vocabulary.*
10. *It is my way of honoring God, who said, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God."*

Something to think about the next time you are tempted to let out with a string of oaths!

By the way, I doubt if God is any more pleased with our Christianized swear words than He is with the world's gross profanity. We have adopted euphemisms for most of the profane vocabulary we hear. We use golly, gee whiz, jiminy christmas, goshdarn. Do we really think those words leave us guiltless when it comes to misusing God's name?

But as bad as profanity is, it's probably not the chief peril addressed by the Third Commandment for most of us. Even people who wouldn't think of using God's name in cursing may still be guilty because they use God's name flippantly or irreverently.

The use of God's name flippantly or irreverently. Do you ever hear people refer to God as "The Man Upstairs" or "The Big Guy in the Sky." What we need to realize is that when we do this we are communicating and showing a lack of respect for God Himself, not just His Name. Many people address human leaders with more respect than they do the Creator of the Universe. When in the presence of the President of the United States even his political enemies almost always refer to him as "Mr. President." Professors are called "Dr. So and So," not their first names. Catholics would never refer to the Pope as Pope Benny, but rather as "Holy Father," (wrongly, in my estimation). All I am illustrating here is the respect and honor accorded to important people as compared to the disrespect and dishonor that is often accorded God.

Another way we use God's name flippantly or irreverently is when we see a spectacular or breathtaking view and say, "God, that's beautiful," or when we use His Name as an expression of surprise, "Oh God, you scared me!" We're not cursing anyone, but we're using God's name as a casual interjection. That is a misuse of His name, and friends, the fact that this is very common among Christians doesn't make it right.

The use of God's name to gain credibility. How many people use God's name to advance their own agenda! Politicians often end a speech by saying, "God bless you, and may God bless America." They may not even believe in God or give much evidence of consulting Him in their decision-making processes, but they invoke His name to gain credibility. That, I believe, is a misuse of His name. In fact, His name has been used to endorse everything from the Crusades to the slave trade, from political parties to social causes, and the results are almost always disastrous for the Faith.^v

But I want to really bring this particular issue home to some of us in this room. Have you ever known a chronic name-dropper? I'm talking about someone who is always mentioning important people that he or she supposedly knows, thereby trying to gain status and credibility by osmosis. Sadly, we see that sort of thing being done by Christian people with God's Name. I often hear good Christian people utter the phrase, "God told me." Or, "I was studying Scripture and God showed me such-and-such." I think this is way overdone in Charismatic circles, and sometimes even in our circles.

Wouldn't it be more honest and certainly more humble in most cases to say, "I prayed, and the strong impression I received was that I should do such-and-such." Or, "I was studying God's Word, and this is what I learned." When we trump our decisions and our interpretations with God-talk aren't we really just trying to gain credibility? After all, who can argue with us if we say, "God told me"? When we attach God's name to something, we'd better be absolutely certain it came from Him.

There's an even more serious way in which God's name is misused to gain credibility, and that is

when false teachers claim to speak for God as they teach the health/wealth Gospel or salvation by works or some other heresy. This is from Ezekiel 13:1-9:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing (They just made up their visions). ! (Verse 6) Their visions are false and their divinations a lie. They say, "The LORD declares," when the LORD has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled. Have you not seen false visions and uttered lying divinations when you say, "The LORD declares," though I have not spoken?

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Because of your false words and lying visions, I am against you, declares the Sovereign LORD. My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations."

There are times, of course, when it's OK to say, "This is what the Lord says," like when you're reading Scripture or teaching it accurately, but not when trying to prop up weak arguments or sound super-spiritual.

The use of God's name in hypocrisy. Someone has said, "The worst blasphemy is not profanity but lip service." There are a lot of people who take upon themselves the Lord's name (after all, "Christian" means "follower of Christ") but they are not fully devoted to Him nor willing to do what He commands. Is this not a misuse of the Lord's name?

A very common kind of hypocrisy that I believe misuses God's name is insincere worship. How often do we participate in musical worship, for example, singing profound words of commitment and praise while our minds are wandering or our lives are a blatant contradiction of what we are singing. I came across the following anonymous quote:

We sing "Sweet Hour of Prayer," and are content with a couple of minutes a day.

We sing "Onward Christian Soldiers," and wait to be drafted.

We sing "O, for a Thousand Tongues," and don't use the one we have.

We sing "Blest Be the Tie that Binds," and let the least little offense sever that tie.

We sing "Serve the Lord with Gladness," and gripe about all we have to do.

We sing "I Love to Tell the Story," and rarely ever mention it to anyone around us.

My point is not that we shouldn't sing these songs; rather it is that we should listen to what we're singing and at least have the intention to live the words.

The final misuse of God's name I want to mention is . . .

The use of God's name in making promises that are not kept. Whenever we make a promise to God and break it, we have misused His Name. This kind of violation of God's Name often arises in times of trouble. We are prone to make promises like: "God, if you get me out of this I will serve you the rest of my life." Or, "God, help me get this job or promotion and I'll give you 10% of my income." And then we quickly forget when God grants our requests. Look

at Deuteronomy 23:21-23, which addresses vows made to God.

If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth.

But the Third Commandment is probably more specifically applicable to promises we make to other people and then attach God's name to it in order to prove our sincerity. Examples are "So help me God" or "the Lord is my witness." Both the Old and New Testaments speak of the danger of this practice. In Leviticus 19:12 we read, "Do not swear falsely *by my name* and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD." The prophet Jeremiah condemns those who say, "as surely as the LORD lives," yet swear falsely (5:2). Ancient people, as modern, were not beyond saying, "God strike me dead if I'm lying" and then proceed to tell a bald-faced lie.

The Pharisees understood that the misuse of God's name in making promises was forbidden, but they came up with the wrong solution. The right solution would be to quit making promises they didn't intend to keep. But their solution was to keep making false promises but studiously avoid using the actual name of God in their oaths. In its place they swore by the temple or by heaven or by something else sacred. We do the same thing today. Instead of using God's name, we will say, "I swear on a stack of Bibles." Is that any better than swearing by God's name? Jesus rightly called them on this phoney baloney in the Sermon on the Mount when He told them,

Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matthew 5:34-37).

I don't think Jesus was trying to say that it's never OK to swear an oath, even in court. Rather what He is telling us is that our reputation for truthfulness should be so thorough that people will believe us just on our word, without any oath at all. William, Prince of Orange and King of the Dutch Republic, gave a glowing compliment to the Baptists of Holland when he said, "Their yes was equal to our oath." Would that was true of all who name the name of Christ!

Having examined a number of actions and attitudes the Third Commandment forbids, I think it is important to speak also of what this Commandment requires.

The Third Commandments requires . . .

That we honor God for who He is. Orthodox Jews will not speak the name of God nor even write it. When they have to refer to God, even in English, they will write G-d. I respect them for that, but I don't think that's the best way to honor God's name, or His person represented by His name. As a matter of fact, God wants us to use His name. It is used over 7000 times in the OT alone! God gave us His name so that we would be able to address him personally. Calling him by name strengthens our love relationship with Him.

How do we honor His name? We honor it, first of all, by avoiding all the things we mentioned under our first point—profanity, irreverence, name-dropping, hypocrisy, breaking promises. But to put it positively, we honor God’s name when we believe what He has told us about Himself and when we live out the faith in Him that we profess.

That we show gratitude and praise for what He has done. Do you know what plagiarism is? It’s pawning off someone else’s work as your own, stealing their words or ideas or art but putting your own name on it. The honor and praise belonging to the person who really did the work goes to another who did not do it!

Well, I suggest to you that there’s a lot of plagiarism going on in respect to God’s name. How often is His name wiped out, deleted, and erased from His creation and the credit given to someone else or something else.^{vi} One of the biggest culprits is “Mother Nature.” What is that! When people speak of Mother Nature accomplishing something they are plagiarizing God’s glory. When they give credit for God’s creative power to “the Force,” or “the wonders of evolution” or “chance,” they are plagiarizing God’s glory. In fact, whenever we take pride in something we have accomplished without acknowledging God as the giver of every good and perfect gift, we are plagiarizing God’s glory.

The Psalmist pleads with us,

*Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.*

The Third Commandment includes a penalty for misusing God’s name.

As I said earlier, only two of the commandments, the second and third, include sanctions within the actual commandment. The Second speaks of God punishing the children for the sin of the fathers (the sin of idolatry, which is hatred toward God) to the third and fourth generation. The Third speaks even more directly: “The LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” I can’t tell you what that penalty will be—we are not told here—but we will be held accountable when we misuse God’s name.

With guilt comes either discipline or punishment, depending upon whether the guilty party is a child of God or not. The chastisement for a believer may include a loss of fellowship, perhaps a removal of blessing, maybe a lack of fruitfulness, until there is repentance. But always remember that the purpose of discipline is to bring about repentance and restoration of fellowship. The punishment for an unbeliever (if there is no repentance) will be eternal separation from the Father.

Friends, the Third Commandment speaks primarily of the name of God, Yahweh. But one can't read the NT for five minutes without seeing that the name of Jesus is just as precious, just as sacred, just as powerful as the name of God. And I think it is just as much a violation of this Commandment to misuse His name.

I have here in my hand a list of the verses where Jesus' name is referred to just in the Book of Acts. It's three full pages long. Listen to just the first half-dozen or so references:

Acts 2:21: And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Acts 2:38: Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

Acts 2:37-39: Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Acts 3:5-7: "By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see."

Acts 3:15-17: They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Acts 4:6-8: They said, "Know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed."

Acts 4:9-11: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

If you have never bowed to the Name of Jesus, let me tell you clearly that there is no other name by which you can be saved and must be saved.

I close with this story. Alexander the Great had a soldier brought before him who faced court-martial for misconduct. The man stood before the Greek commander with trembling knees. "What's your name?" he was asked. "Alexander, Sir," he replied quietly. There was a pause. Again the emperor asked, "Soldier, I asked you, 'What is your name?'" "My name is Alexander!" he answered, this time a little louder, thinking he had not been heard. With a face red with fury, the commander shouted at him once more, "What is your name?" With confusion on his face the soldier responded meekly, almost as though he were asking a question, "Alexander?" Alexander the Great stood up and demanded, "Young man, either change your conduct or change your name."

We call ourselves Christians, God's children. Are we? Do we live like it? The Third

Commandment demands that we not misuse God's name.

i. I will never forget Dr. Charles Feinberg. He was a famous Hebrew scholar who was wrapping up his career when I entered seminary over 40 years ago. He came to Dallas Seminary to give a series of lectures, and as I was walking to chapel I ran into him. He shocked me by saying, "Michael Andrus, how are you, and how are Roger and Mary (my parents' names)?" I said with surprise, "How do you know me?" He said, "I was in your home in Clayton, MO back in 1959. Your mom fixed the most incredible meal." Well, I was just a sophomore in high school in 1959, and this conversation was years later. He just had a photographic memory, which is handy if you're a Hebrew professor. Believe me, Charles Feinberg went down in my personal Hall of Fame. Later two of his sons became professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

ii. William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, 22.

iii. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 107.

iv. Rushdoony, 109-110.

v. Philip Ryden, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, 580.

vi. Edith Schaeffer, *Lifelines: The Ten Commandments for Today*, 75.