

## **The Third Commandment: Do Not Wrongly Take God's Name**

**Exodus 20:7**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 20 and the 7th verse. For the last few weeks we have been looking at the Ten Commandments themselves. Before that we tried to give some sort of a context for the ten commands by looking at Exodus chapter 19, and the first two verses of Exodus chapter 20 so that we could appreciate this setting of God's household instruction which we call the Ten Commandments. We've looked at the first 2 commandments.

In studying the first commandment, we indicated that that commandment was about the proper object of our worship. That only the one true God is to be worshiped. "You shall have no other gods before Me." In saying that, God does not mean that He wants to be first amongst the pantheon of gods. He's not saying that He wants to be the number one in the polytheistic universe of gods. You can have as many other gods as you want as long as He's first, and there's no one ahead of Him. He means He wants no god to be before His face. He's the only true God. He's not saying that there are other gods. He's saying that there are other things that people make to be gods, and He doesn't want them displayed in front of Him. He wants to have nothing - "don't bring them into My presence. Don't bring them before My face because I'm the only true God. I'm the only God who ought to be worshiped. And so this command, "the first and greatest commandment" Jesus called it, is that we would love, and serve, and worship Him alone. And so the first commandment deals with the "who" of worship, the object of worship, God, the one true God.

The second commandment we saw a couple of weeks ago deals with the "how" of worship, the way of worship. How is it that we are to worship the one true God? In the second commandment we saw God explicitly saying that He did not want to be worshiped via idols. Idols were not to be made, and they were not to be used in the worship of the one true God. It's not simply that you shouldn't worship idols in addition to the one true God. It's not simply that you shouldn't worship idols in the place of the one true God. It's that you should not worship idols as a means of worshiping the one true God. And the classic example of this is in Exodus chapter 32 in the story of the golden calf. The golden calf is not

represented to Israel by Aaron as another god than which brought them out of Egypt, but as an image of the one true God who brought them out of Egypt. And what does God do? He condemns the Israelites for worshiping Him through the vehicle of this idol. And so the principle which underlies the second commandment is that we worship God in the way which He asks us to worship Him. We worship the one true God not according to the imaginations of our minds, or the preferences of our wills, but in the way that He teaches us in the Bible. And so the first commandment deals with the "who" of worship. The second commandment deals with the "how" of worship.

And the third commandment comes back to make us mindful again of the "who" of worship. The God whom we worship is holy, and He ought to be treated as such. Not only in our speech, but in all of our conduct. And so the third commandment deals somewhat with the claims of the one holy and true God on us, and the responsibility that we have to treat Him as holy. The third commandment is seen in the very first petition of the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father, who art in heaven, holy is Your name." This commandment is about treating the name of the Lord, the person of the Lord, the reputation of the Lord as it is, and that is holy. Let's hear God's word then in Exodus chapter 20 beginning in verse 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."

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would teach us what it means not to take Your name in vain. And then by grace enable us to walk in honor of Your holy name. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

Now as a southern boy I grew up thinking that this commandment is primarily like one's grandmother's directive, "Son, don't cuss." Now can I put it that way? Thinking that this commandment is primarily telling us that we ought not to use profanity in our speech. And this command does have something to say to us about the profaning of God's name by speech. But it has a broader application than just what we might call gutter language. It has an application to all of our speech including oath taking and making vows. But you see it's even broader than that. In fact I'm going to suggest to you that this commandment is broader and far more important than you have perhaps ever imagined. And I'd like to explore that with you in three ways today.

Looking at what this commandment tells us about the name of God, at what this commandment tells us about the misuse of the name of God, and what this commandments tells us about God's warning against the misuse of his name. Those three things I'd like to consider with you today as we look at this one small

but significant verse.

## **I. The misuse of God's name.**

Let's begin with the very first words of Exodus 20 verse 7, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God..." This portion of the verse, this part of the commandment tells us about the name of God. And the point of the commandment is that the name of God be treated with respect, not only in our speech, but also in the whole of our living. This commandment is as broad as life. The third commandment means "Don't take up God's name wrongly." Not only don't speak God's name wrongly, not only don't write God's name wrongly, not only don't use God's name wrongly, but whenever you take up God's name, make sure you take it up aware of His holiness and consistently with His holiness. Don't claim His name unless you treat it with reverence and respect. This command, like the previous 2 commandments that we have already studied, begins with a very strong negative. Moses is telling you here, God is telling you here, "Absolutely do not do what follows. Do not take My name in vain." Now in our minds as modern Protestants, this is primarily a command to do with profane language. And to the ancient Jews and to the modern orthodox Jew it has come to mean a command not to use any of God's covenant names or titles in a spoken or written way which would bring him dishonor. And therefore, many orthodox Jews will not write the name or title of God, so as to avoid defaming it.

But I want you to see that this command is broader than just the speaking of God's name or the writing of God's name. It is as expansive as life itself. "to take up" is the language of the courtroom. And the beginning of understanding this commandment is to understand that at its heart we are being told not to take up God's name in an oath in vain. Now you say, "But isn't that a lot like the ninth commandment 'Don't bear false witness'?"

Yes, you're right, but from two different perspectives. The ninth commandment is worried about harming our neighbor by a false oath. The third commandment is at least concerned about harming the reputation and name of God because of a false oath. As the ninth commandment tells us that we must protect our neighbor's name and reputation, so the third commandment tells us that we must protect God's name and reputation by the way we take up that name. And so at the very heart this is a command that God's name is not to be appealed to in an oath in any solemn situation unless we intend to be faithful to the commitment that we are giving our word to. In solemn situations when God's name is taken up, it must be done with fidelity. It must be done with reverence. To appeal to God in an oath, the third commandment is saying, to appeal to God in an oath and then to violate that oath is not simply to lie, it is to bring into disrepute God's name and God's character because God has given you His name. And when you, bearing His name, take His name in vain by contradicting His commands, and calling into question His character, you defame Him before the world.

But even more broadly, more broadly than oath taking, more broadly than solemn legal situations, this command speaks of any claim we make relating to God's name; such as the claim to be His people. If we claim to be the people of God and then live as if we are not, we take His name in vain. If we claim to be Christians, and then live as if we are not, we take His name in vain. The name of God is very, very significant in several ways. First of all in Old Testament cultures, in the cultures around Israel in the days of the Old Testament, the name of gods were very significant for giving you access to those gods, and influence with those gods. To know the name of the god enabled you to have a certain access and influence, and perhaps even to use the name of that god for blessing and cursing. And so also the one true God giving His name to His people was a special blessing to them. For them to know His name, His covenant name, was to give them a special privilege of access to Him in order to pray, in order to ask for blessing, in order to be a part of His family.

And we understand that even in our modern culture today. Why is that fund raisers, that developers, are so careful to make sure they have an accurate list of your name on their mailing list? Because they know that getting your name right, and getting your name wrong, may be the difference between them getting a contribution or not from you. Have you ever had one of those wonderful, personal contacts written to you from someone asking for money, "Dear Mr. J. Vigon Duncan, Dear Friend. We are writing you today about 'x.'" Now I don't know about you but the minute I get a letter to J. Vigon Duncan, V-i-g-o-n, especially after I've made a contribution, my heart sinks. Or maybe you have gotten one of those very personal phone calls. "May I speak with Legion Duncan?" And immediately you know this person doesn't know me. This person doesn't know me from Adam's house cat, and I'm not giving them any money. Hang up. To know the name of God is to have access to Him. And one of the beautiful things He has done with his people is to share His name with us. He has given us a knowledge of His name. This is one of the beautiful truths of Exodus chapter 6, that the Lord has revealed to His people His covenant name. He is the Lord, the Lord your God. And so they are to call on Him in the name of the Lord.

But the meaning of his name is even more significant than this. More importantly, God's name stands for His reputation, and when we use that name wrongly, either in our speech or in our lives, we bring it into disrepute. When a father sends his son into the world bearing his last name, or even his first name, in many ways that father's reputation is on the line. The son's honor, the son's conduct reflects on the upbringing which he received in the home, and reflects on the family name. Just as sons who love their fathers, just as daughters who love their fathers, desire to bring honor to the family name, so also Christians desire not to bring dishonor to the name of the heavenly Father. But through our life, and through our lips, and through our love, we desire that His name would be exalted.

We've said before in our studies of the book of Exodus that so often we hear this attitude, "Oh, I don't want to go see a Christian professional because you can't trust people who put the name Christian in front of their particular profession. I'd rather go to someone who is competent and secular because Christians you can't trust." When we have done that, when we have given the world that kind of an attitude towards Christians in vocation, Christians in the work place, we have taken God's name in vain. We have brought it into dishonor, by calling ourselves Christians, and yet not treating the name that He has given to us "Christian" with honor. God has given His name to you, and He has taken your name to Him. If you have trusted in Him, if you have been joined to His church, you have received baptism, and in baptism you have received His name. Just as a husband gives a wife His name, so also the Father has given you His name. That is why you are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is laying a claim on you. And you are professing to be wholly and solely the Lord's. And so if God has given His name to you, and yet you live in a way which dishonors that name, you are breaking the third commandment.

We see then, just an inkling of how broad this commandment is. It stretches to every area of life. If we dishonor the name of the Lord in how we live, whether it be through our lips, whether it be through unfaithfulness in our vocation, whether it be through unloving behavior which bears poor witness to the world, then we are breaking the third commandment. It is a very important commandment. And we're going to see how important it is in tonight's message when Derek speaks about a man who had the name of God, who was part of the people of God, and yet who disobeyed God. We are going to see the truth of Exodus 20 verse 7, the second half of the verse, applied in action as we study Joshua 7 tonight and the sin of Achan. God takes it very seriously when we take His name in vain. That's the first thing I want you to see.

## **II. Do not dishonor the name of the Lord.**

The second thing is this. Look again at verse 7. "you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." This command not only tells us about the importance of the name of God, it tells us about the misuse of the name of God, and it tells us that the name of God is not to be dishonored. The third command means do not dishonor God's name in any way. This command deals with any abuse of the divine name, not just cursing, not just profanity, not just a mocking and irreverent use of God's name, and not even just telling the truth when we are under oath. "I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God," we say in court. It does, of course, this command specifically enjoin us to truth telling and to solemnity when we are under oath. Our oath is a reflection of our God, and our untruthfulness is a poor reflection on Him. But this command means more than that. To take up God's name in vain means any frivolous, or insincere, or thoughtless, or unsubstantial use of His name. It might mean irreverent humor which mocks God in speech, or mocks others with His name. It might be

blasphemy or cursing or a broken oath, but it means more than that. It could mean professing faith in Christ, and claiming to be a Christian, and receiving baptism, and yet walking in worldliness. Denying our profession by our lives, that is a breaking of the third commandment.

Not long ago a covenant child of this congregation, who is a vibrant believer in the Lord Jesus Christ right now, praise God, made a contact with some of our youth ministry to say that he had come through the communicants class at First Presbyterian Church and professed faith. And yet during his high school years had not lived as a Christian. And a very faithful youth worker had confronted him with the fact that He was not living as a Christian even though he had professed faith. In fact that youth worker was so faithful in confronting him that He got angry. And he complained to his parents. And He turned his parents against the youth worker. And then he went off to college, and under the ministry of Reformed University Ministries, in God's grace, was brought to saving faith in Christ. And he was writing to say, "Thank you for being faithful to call on me to live like what I professed." Young people, if you profess faith in Jesus Christ, now, not later, now is the time to live in accordance with that profession. This commandment says that when we take up the name Christian, we better mean it. Because when we are called Christian we are being called by Christ's name. And do you know what Paul says about that name? That name is the name above every name. And when we take up the name Christian, we are taking to ourselves the name which is above every name and saying, "we are followers of the One who possesses the name above every name." And that calls us to live by the grace of the Holy Spirit in accordance with what we profess.

### **III. The penalty for misusing God's name.**

Thirdly, if you look again at the end of verse 7 we read: "for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes his name in vain." This is God's warning about misuse of his name. And we learn here that God takes his name seriously. And the third command tells us that God will judge those who are ultimately hypocritical in the use of His name. If we take up His name, but we do not take up the reality of it; if we profess His name, but we do not live in accordance with that profession; if we say that we have tasted grace, but we have not tasted grace; then we take His name in vain. God will not allow His name to be misused even though some may think they get by with it. Some may think that they get by with it in the civil courts. They lie under oath. They lie in the name of God. And they may think that they have gotten by with it. We have had some fairly astounding examples of this in recent times. But God will not allow His name to be taken in vain. Others may take His name in vain by professing to be believers, and yet not following Him. And they may think, "Well, the church hasn't found me out." But God will not leave those unpunished who take His name in vain. For all who break God's law, for all who take up that name and yet never actually embrace His Lordship, there remains a final judgment. For all those who take up

the name of Christ, they profess Him, they claim Him, but they do not love Him and trust Him, they do not rest in Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel, they have taken His name up in vain.

On Palm Sunday, almost 2000 years ago a group of people took up the name of Jesus Christ, and they called Him "The King," and they sang, "Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." And they sang His praises, and they adored Him, and they waved palm branches at Him. And five days later, they shouted "Crucify Him." They took His name in vain.

Professing believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, have you taken His name in vain? Have you claimed to be His follower, and yet you do not love Him, and you do not trust Him, and you do not have faith in Him, and you do not obey Him, and walk with Him? Have you taken His name in vain? God will not hold him guiltless who takes that name in vain.

Have you never trusted in Christ? Do you think that in the last day when you stand before God, He'll receive you in because you've been a good person, but you've never taken up for yourself the name which is above every name? Do you know what the Bible says about that name? There is no other name in heaven, under heaven, whereby a man can be saved. Don't come to the one true God on the last day unless you know the one who has the name above every name. Because in the end He will say, "I never knew you."

Believer, walk in accordance with the profession of the name. Unbeliever, friend, come to God and I promise you, you will be received if you trust in Jesus whose name is above every name, for He Himself says, "Come to me all you who are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And no one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. May God grand that we trust in that name truly. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, grant that when we say "All hail the power of Jesus name" that by the grace of the Spirit we would mean it. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

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