

In the Name of God

Good morning friends.

If you are just joining us, we are in **week three** of a study on the 10 Commandments – within a larger study in the book of Exodus.

And this morning we come to the **third commandment** – *to not misuse the Name of the LORD*. Which, the more I've reflected on it, the more I'm convinced is one of the most important commandments – which I think I've said each of the last two weeks – but I mean it. I'm convinced is one of the **most important** commandments – and yet sadly, one of the most **misunderstood** commandments.

A number of years ago, I read a fascinating and hilarious book called, The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible by A.J. Jacobs. It was a great read. At the time, Jacob's was a typical secular Jew in America, an editor of Esquire magazine, and the book was really his journal from a one-year experiment that he embraced – seeking to understand and live all the commandments of the Bible.

And I want to read you a little piece from it this morning as we begin to consider this commandment together.

*Month Ten: June
Day 277. "How was the birthday party?" I ask Julie.
She and Jasper had just returned from a party at a preschool on the East Side.*

"OK. But they had this rabbit for the kids to pet, and there was rabbit shnikies everywhere." [Now, she didn't say 'shnikies'. She used another word, a shorter word, that begins with the letter 's'. You know the word.]

I am shocked at her language [he writes]. And then **I am shocked that I am shocked**. When I first met Julie, she rarely cursed, whereas I had no filter whatsoever. I chose a particularly adolescent curse word as my default computer password...

But for the last two months, inspired by Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians, I haven't used a single naughty word. And it startles me when others do.

What is a biblically naughty word? Well, there are two genres: blasphemy and profanity. Blasphemy is the subject of the Third Commandment, which orders us not to take the Lord's name in vain. What does it mean to take the Lord's name in vain? Is it when you say the word God in any secular context? Or is it only when you invoke God's name while lying under oath? Or is it uttering the word Yahweh, which might come close to the pronunciation of God's holy name?" (281)

From there, Jacobs meanders into a bunch of other topics, but I think he gets us started well.

What does it mean to take the Name of the Lord our God in vain?

Let me read the third Commandment for us.

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."

Or as another translation has it (maybe one more familiar to many),

"You shalt 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." (NASB)

If anything, that last part of the verse – **the warning** – should give us reason to take some time to discern what this commandment means and what God is saying to us... because clearly is something that God takes **very seriously**. (just as He does murder, and adultery, and idolatry!)

The Third Commandment is not just some middle-school playground matter.

So, with that in mind, **LET'S PRAY** and ask God to help us understand what He obviously cares so much about. -----

Now, before we can answer the question of what it means to take the LORD's name **in vain**, we need to back up and ask: **What's in a Name?**

Well, if you've been journeying with in the Exodus story, you'll know that when the Bible refers to God's Name, it's not just talking about God's label or title. God's Name represents **God's character**.

As one scholar explains,

"YAHWEH, or 'LORD', is much more than a name. It is God's identity. This was the whole Hebrew understanding of names. For us a name is a label; it is something we have, not something we are." (Ryken)

But the Name of the LORD our God – YAHWEH – represents **WHO GOD IS!** It represents God's essential character, His reputation. God's **Name** represents and encompasses all that GOD has revealed Himself to be.

Which is why the psalmist calls us to "**praise the Name of the LORD**". Not because His Name is so wonderful, but because **God** is so wonderful.

As the New Bible Dictionary explains, **God's Name is "a summary way of stating what God is in Himself (his name is all that is known to be true about him and his motives of action) and also what God is to others, allowing them to know his name..."**

There is a story in **Exodus 33-34** that perfectly unpacks this (I referenced it briefly last Sunday). In Exodus 33:18, Moses has the boldness to ask God – the Saving God of Exodus – **"Show me your glory."**

[Ever said that to God? *"Show me your glory... Show me who you are... Tear back the veil and let me see you in all of your glory."*]

And in response, the LORD said to Moses,

"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my **Name**, the LORD, in your presence."

And then in **Exodus 34:5f**, we read,

*"Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his **name**, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.'"*

All that to say, the **Name** of the LORD is more than just what God is called. It represents **all that God is**.

God's Name encompasses **all** that God has revealed Himself to be.

Which should help us see that **this commandment** cannot primarily be a prohibition against **using** God's personal name – YAHWEH – the name that He instructed Moses to use in speaking of Him (Exodus 3:14). The Name that is referenced almost **7000 times** in the Old Testament.

At some point in history, Orthodox Jews interpreted the Commandment this way – and utterly stopped pronouncing this name – Yahweh – out of the concern to not *misuse* it or *take it in vain*.

But clearly this is not the heart of the Commandment.

As I think we'll see, the issues at stake in this commandment are **far more serious** and **more important** than if and how we pronounce God's personal name.

For if God's Name above all refers to the revelation of **God's character**, then our use or misuse of God's Name must have something to do with **OUR character** – as the people who bear God's Name!

And we need to take this to heart – because too often we've interpreted this commandment solely as a Divine directive for us to "watch our mouths" and clean up the speech of our pagan neighbors or co-workers! To help make sure they don't "take the Lord's Name in vain".

But this commandment isn't spoken to our neighbors. It's not spoken to pagans. It wasn't spoken to the Egypt.

It was spoken to Israel, and to us – to those who bear God's Name!

So **what is God's Name? What is God like?**

Well, we'd need to do a survey of the whole Bible to **fully** answer that question, but even just a look at what the Israelites knew of God at this point in their journey – tells us so much...

From all that they had experienced so far in their journey with God from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai... From all that they had experienced so far of God,

- they knew YAHWEH to be a **God who cares** for His people.
- A God who **is faithful** to His promises.
- A God who **hears the cries** of the oppressed
- and comes in **compassion to rescue** and save them.
- They knew Him to be a God who **provides for** His people.
- A God **who is all-powerful**.
- A God **who is just – who** is unwilling to stand by and let injustice happen, but who is constantly seeking justice.
- They knew Him to **be a good God**. A God who wants their good. Who is seeking their good, and the good of *all people*.
- They knew Him to be a **God whom they could trust**.

And because of this, **they worshipped God – they praised His Name**. From all that they had experienced of God, they knew that God's **Name** was and is worthy to be praised.

And then on Mt. Sinai, they heard God's command –

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

And they knew what He meant.

They knew that God's reputation **was now bound up in them**. That God's Name, that God's character **was now bound up in them...** for *they* would forever be *"a people called by His Name"* (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Which is one of **the incredible things** about YAHWEH – the God of Exodus (contrary to the gods of the Egyptians).

This is a God who shares His Name!

Not that the Egyptian gods didn't have names – names that were known (we've named many of them before) – but as the history books attest, and my daughter (a budding student of ancient mythology) has helped me understand – the gods of Egypt **were** known by name – but not by their **True Name**, not by their **Secret Name**. The Name that revealed their true essence and identity.

This Name they would never reveal – because if anyone, including another god, knew their True Name, the other would have power over them.

And so they would never reveal their True Name.

Not so with YAHWEH – Israel's God, the God of Exodus.

Here is a God who is **willing** – more than that, who **desires** to **share His Name – His True Name – with Israel... and with us...**

And not just in the sense of **revealing** His Name to them (and to us), but in the sense of allowing them, and us, **to share in His Name...** to share in the revelation and reputation of God's Name – **for better and for worse!**

Which was unheard of!

And dangerous!

And incredible!

That God – YAHWEH – the Saving God of Exodus – would choose not only to rescue Israel, and reveal Himself to Israel, but **to share His Name with them...** *To put His reputation on the line – with them and in them...*

Which, I think, helps us understand the **logic** and **gravity** of the Third Commandment – *"You shall not misuse the Name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name..."*

As one scholar explains.

"In Jewish tradition *hillul ha-Shem* ("profanation of the Name") is regarded as one of the most serious of sins. It means to live in such a way that people around us lose respect for God's holy name... We are instead commanded to 'lift up his name' through our lives so God will be revered, trusted, and loved by others..." (Larsson)

..... as God **so** deserves.

But sadly, as we all know, **God's Name has not honored.**

Fact is, God's Name has been and is often **dishonored** in our day.

We live in a world where God, where our Father in heaven, as the apostle Paul describes Him, *"the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"* is continually maligned, slandered and despised.

And primarily, for two reasons...

First – because this is simply at the heart of the sinfulness that grips all of humanity (all of us): *we are in rebellion against God and everything inside of us seeks to deny God the honor due His Name.*

And **second** – because of how God's people have taken His Name in vain. Because of how God's people have acted "*in His Name*" – in our day and down through history.

The story of Israel and the history of the Christian Church, is rife with stories of how those called by God's Name have brought dishonor to His Name.

We read about it in the prophets again and again, God rebuking Israel for how they have ***profaned His holy Name*** in the sight of the nations...

We read about it in **Romans 2**, where the apostle Paul rebukes a group of Jewish Christians saying, "*You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.'*"

And we read about it in the history books... the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Witch-hunts, the history of racism and sexism in the church, and the vilification of the Queer community.

The history of Christianity has many low points that have brought great dishonor to God's Name. In Bruxy Cavey's book, The End of Religion, he quotes Gore Vidal as saying, "***More people have been killed in the name of Jesus Christ than any other name in the history of the world.***" (30)

It's no wonder that many of our friends and neighbors have no interest in the gospel of Jesus. What they have seen and heard of Christians has left them thinking little of our God.

The third commandment has **little** to do with if and how we pronounce the personal name of God. But it has **everything** to do with how **we**, those of us who are called by God's Name, live in God's Name. ***Because God's Name is on the line... in us.***

Which, if I'm honest, feels **so heavy**. The heaviest responsibility imaginable.

AND YET – in the grace of God, I've found myself confronted by the other side of this story of late...

Just the other day – Friday afternoon, in fact – sitting at the Cridge Center for the Family – celebrating **Mimi Davis' retirement** after 28 years with the Cridge – hearing the story of **Bishop Cridge** and his wife Mary – following God's call to serve in a frontier called Victoria – and not just preaching the gospel here, but **living the gospel here – honoring God's Name** everywhere they went – as a God who saw the suffering, and responded to the suffering, who cared for the suffering... A God who spoke truth – truth that set people free... a God who cares for orphans and widows...

And out of this, came **the Cridge Center** – which initially was a wonderfully loving Orphanage, and then became a vibrant center of support for children, women and families in need – all in the Name of God...

And, if they weren't busy enough, Bishop Cridge and Mary saw the need for a hospital in Victoria – and helped found the Royal Jubilee Hospital – because God cares for the sick and dying...

And a century and a half later, the Cridge Center is still doing needed, good and beautiful work in this city – through an amazing team of people – like Mimi – all in God's Name.

But it's not just people like Bishop Cridge doing grand things for God, it's people like my **grandmother – Margaret Bennett** – who passed away on January 19th at the age of 96.

I don't think any grand institutions will ever bear her name, but she was **a woman who bore God's Name** so beautifully, day in and day out, in the everyday matters of her ordinary life – as a sister, a daughter, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, an active servant in her church, and a friend to many.

Truth is, we could go around this room and list off so many names – of people who have honored God's Name before us – in big and little ways – each so needed – each a part of why we are here today – seeking Jesus...

*All because of the beautiful and dangerous grace that **God shares His Name – with us...***

A grace made fully open to us **in Jesus.**

And I say **in Jesus** – because it is in the life and ministry, words and actions, and ultimately, sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross – that we see God's Name – God's character – God's Identity – **most fully.**

In Jesus, we are invited to know ***God's True Name.***

And not just to **know** it – but **to share in it.**

To **share in** – to **live in God's Name.**

Which is what the gospel is all about!

That **in** the life and death of Jesus – we would know God's Name.

And **through** faith in Jesus, we would find our sin – our dishonoring of God's Name – taken to the grave with Jesus – paid for and forgiven – that we might now be raised up with Jesus – and led into Life **in His NAME!**

Men and women baptized – **immersed into "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."**

This, in the end, is salvation – to live our lives in the Name of Jesus.

So, what are we to do?

What are we to do with the Third Commandment and the knowledge that we – those called by God's name – have often, too often, misrepresented God's Name and brought dishonor to His Name?

What are we to do? 2 things!

The 2 things we are always called to do – **repentance** and **faith**.

1. We need to confess and repent... to God and to others.

Over the years, I've been thankful to discover so many books, written to introduce the curious and skeptical to Christianity, beginning with, or involving some expression of confession and repentance. Some expression of acknowledgment that Christians and the Church have often misrepresented Jesus and the gospel, and not just so as to help people differentiate Jesus from the church, but **to truly repent... to confess... to apologize for how we have done this.**

And it's so needed... for our sake (as much as for others). Cause **there is no true change without repentance.**

And so we need to repent – to own up to how we have misrepresented God to others and the world around us... to think again about our lives and the life of Jesus, where the two disconnect, and let our repentance lead us forward in humility and love...

And we need to repent for the sake of others. Cause unless we own up to what we've done wrong, to where the Church has gone wrong, many people will never give Jesus a second glance.

And as many of us know, **He is so worth a second glance.**

I would not be a follower of Jesus and proud to bear His Name if I was not convinced that His Name is indeed worthy of all praise.

I suspect some of us might have read it before, but I want to read a portion from **Donald Miller's chapter on "Confession" in Blue Like Jazz** - cause I don't I could say it better... (p.116-117)

So, one – we need to Confess and Repent.

And second: we need to surrender our lives (the whole of our lives) **to Jesus** – to surrender to His call to ***come be His disciples*** – that we might learn from Him and be empowered by Him to live the whole of our lives for God's glory, that others would discover the truth and beauty and grace and holiness of God in us.

To take as our prayer the words to a song we used to sing, "*May the words of my mouth and thoughts of my heart, bless your Name... bless your Name... of Jesus. And the deeds of the day and the truth of my ways, speak of You... speak of You... oh Jesus.*"

This is our calling *and this is the gospel* – that, in Christ – that by surrendering in faith to Jesus – we can be forgiven and restored – little by little – to live as we were intended...

*For God's glory, for the sake of the world,
and for our joy in Him.*

So, **I want to close by inviting us to come** and receive the Lord's Supper today – the bread and the cup, a tangible reminders of God's sufficient grace for sinners like you and me.

Come in confession and repentance

And come in faith... again or maybe for the first time.

Jesus is calling:

"Come.

Come to me.

Come and know God's Name.

And come follow Me

into life in My Name...