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The Name of the Lord Your God Exodus 20:7

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Some years ago our family was on an airplane. Two men and a woman sat down in the row behind us. They'd been together at some kind of conference or trade show and were talking about what happened there. But what got me was their language. They were loud. They may have been a little intoxicated. And they were talking loudly about sex. And the conversation was peppered—actually, it wasn't peppered, because you'd never put that much pepper on anything—it was loaded with loud explosions of “God” and “Jesus” and a bunch of other things. After a couple of minutes, I stood up, looked over the seat, and told them that my wife and I didn't want to hear their sordid stories and that they were especially inappropriate for our pre-school-aged daughter. They shut up, embarrassed. But at the time I was wishing I had my clerical collar on, because I was tempted to stand up and ask, “Are you guys in ministry? I ask because you've been talking about ‘God’ and ‘Jesus’ and ‘hell’ more in two minutes than I do in a typical thirty-minute sermon.”

With that as an introduction, you can probably guess that our text today is the Third Commandment. It's found in Exodus 20:7. Let's read it:

“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.”

Before we start answering the question of what this means for us, we need to ask—as always—what it meant for the Israelites. God's word was written for us, but it wasn't written to us. It was

written to a people in a specific context. The second half of the verse is a reminder of that. “The Lord will not him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” The Decalogue—with the rest of the *torah*—was Israel's end of her covenant with the Lord. It doesn't apply directly to us, because we don't live under that covenant. But we can learn something from it and transpose it into our life in Christ *after* we're aware of what the Lord's point was when he spoke these words to Israel.

So what did this Third Word mean to the Israelites? This is probably the broadest of all the commandments in the Decalogue. First, the Hebrew word that the ESV simply translates as “take” has the sense of bearing something up. So it's saying something like, “You shall not take up the name...” or “You shall not bear the name...” It's more than just merely speaking the name of the Lord. It could be that, but it can also be more than that. And then the word “vain”. The Hebrew word can take the sense of “worthless” or “empty” or “purposeless”, but it's also associated with magic and the taking of oaths.

So the sense here is that God's people are never to use or to bear his name in a way that takes it lightly or that abuses it. That's really broad, but the covenantal context of the Decalogue really helps us grasp what's going on here. Remember, God called Israel to be his people. In claiming them as his own, he declared them holy. He commissioned them or gave them the vocation of representing him in the midst of the nations. It was a call to pick back up the vocation that Adam rejected: to bear God's image. And so, if the nations were to know God through the people who bear his name, they'd better represent him well.

You sew a Canadian flag on your jacket or your backpack so that everyone knows you're a Canadian. And hopefully you represent your country well and leave its reputation intact. But what if you didn't? What if you went to another country and got

drunk, got into fights, stole stuff, and generally made trouble? What would that do to your country's reputation in that foreign land? That's something of what this commandment is getting at, but it's not the land of Israel that Israel is representing; it's Israel's God, which makes it a matter of dire seriousness.

That's what's at the root of this and that's why it's so broad. Many centuries later the Jews prohibited the speaking of God's name lest they abuse it by mispronouncing it. That's how we got the tradition of reading “Lord” wherever the Hebrew text has the letters YHWH, which we're pretty sure was pronounced “Yahweh”. But speaking God's name is not what the commandment is prohibiting. God caused his name to be written in the Scriptures about seven thousand times. He likes us to call him by name.

So here are some of the things the command actually was prohibiting. Again, pay attention to how these things might misrepresent the Lord to the nations when done by his people.

First—and this is typically where Rabbinic and Christian interpreters have put the emphasis—it prohibits false oaths. Making a false oath was a serious crime in the ancient world. A false oath would discredit the name of the Lord. We see this addressed specifically later in the *torah*. Leviticus 19:12, for example, warns:

You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

And this is just one of the many things that got the people into trouble. Through Hosea the Lord speaks:

**They utter mere words;
with empty oaths they make
covenants;
so judgment springs up like
poisonous weeds... (Hosea 10:4**

You see, to swear an oath on the Lord's name is to call on him as a

witness to that oath. To make an oath you don't intend to keep is to treat the Lord as if he isn't watching, that he won't hold you accountable, or maybe that he isn't really there. It's to make light of his name and his presence. But, worse, it's to make use of his name to further *your* own ends, rather than *his*. God's people must never do that.

The other focus that Christian interpreters have seen here is blasphemy. Augustine, for example stressed blasphemy as the point of the Third Commandment. Blasphemy is pretty broad, but it, too, is prohibited specifically in Leviticus.

Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death. (Leviticus 24:16)

The Lord's name was serious business. Blasphemy was no small thing. It was the Lord's land. It was holy. And holiness was a requirement if the people wanted to remain in the Lord's land—whether native Israelite or sojourning foreigner.

Another serious offense for which execution was the penalty was false prophecy. Again, remember that Israel was called to represent the Lord to the nations. To prophesy was to speak for the Lord—in his name. To prophesy falsely was to use his name to further your own lies or your own agenda. It was to speak for yourself while claiming to speak for the Lord. It's hard to imagine a worse way to misrepresent him. This is what Jeremiah 23:25 is getting at when it speaks of “prophets...who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’” And false prophecy, like blasphemy, was no small thing. It is remarkable to me how casually and frivolously people in some Christian circles claim to

prophesy in the name of the Lord and say all sorts of kooky and obviously false things. The penalty for doing that sort of thing in Israel was serious. Here's what Deuteronomy 13 says about false prophets:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and...if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’...you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

It also acknowledges that this false prophet may perform real signs and wonders, but the signs and wonders aren't what mark out a real prophet. It's the message accompanying them. If the prophet *teaches* falsely, if he teaches doctrine that leads people astray, he is a false prophet. Today we've flipped this around. In many Christians circles everything is about the signs and wonders. As long as the supposed signs and wonders are there, undiscerning people lap up whatever false teachings are being spewed by these false prophets. So, don't listen to false prophets. But what about the false prophet himself? Deuteronomy 13:5 says:

But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death.

Claiming to speak for the Lord while spewing lies and false teaching not only has the potential to lead the Lord's people astray, but it also misrepresents the Lord—the precise opposite of what God's people were called to do.

These are things that, if we were to think through what it means to take the name of the Lord in vain, we'd probably come up with pretty easily. But there are other things in the *torah* that fit this category that we might not think of. Take Leviticus 18:21:

You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech,

and so profane the name of your God.

Yes, child sacrifice was a real thing in the Ancient Near East. It was pretty common. And even the Israelites were guilty of it from time to time. But to do as the pagans did was to profane the name of the Lord. The Lord's people had a duty to be different so that the nations would take notice.

Also related to worship, the abuse of the holy things that belonged to God profaned his name. Here's what Leviticus 22:2 says:

Speak to Aaron and his sons so that they abstain from the holy things of the people of Israel, which they dedicate to me, so that they do not profane my holy name.

This gets back to the idea that whatever was holy belonged to the Lord and, vice versa, whatever belong to the Lord was holy—was set apart for his use alone. This went for Israel as a people. But it also went for the temple, the altars, the implements used at the altars, even the incense, and the offerings brought by the people to the Lord. To abuse or to misuse the things that belonged to the Lord was to profane his name.

Finally, one last thing that we might not think of in relation to all this is magic and sorcery. The Hebrew word we translate “vain” here is connected with magic. The idea was that a god's name had power and could be invoked to work magic. To speak the name was to summon the god and to command his power. One of the best examples of this in the Bible is actually in the New Testament, in Acts 19:11-20. Some sons of the high priest saw the miracles that the apostles were doing in the name of Jesus and decided to treat the name of Jesus as if it were a magic talisman. They tried casting out demons merely by invoking Jesus' name and ended

up, instead, overwhelmed by the demons themselves and ran away beat up and in terror. The problem with this sort of thing is that it assumes either that our agenda is God's agenda—which may not be the case—or that we can gain control over God by using his name and that we can then force him to do what we want. Either way, his name is being profaned and he's being misrepresented.

And, again, that's the key point here. Israel was called by God to represent him in the midst of the nations. They were the people who knew him. They were the people who lived with him in their midst. They were holy. For the nations to look at Israel *should have been* something of an introduction to the Lord himself. And so the third commandment, at its root, comes down to Israel's duty to represent the Lord. Anything that misrepresented him, that made him look bad, or that made Israel look anything other than holy, profaned the Lord's name.

Now, how do we transpose this into the New Covenant? Israel's law is not our law. We are not part under that Old Covenant. And yet the application for us of these first three commandments isn't that challenging to see. We worship the same God. And even if the covenant stipulations are different, our calling or vocation as God's people in Christ is an expansion of Israel's calling and vocation. If Israel was called to be the people who represented the Lord to the nations, it is also our calling as the people in whom God's own Spirit dwells. We are his temple.

So, first, we should never enlist God's name to promote what is false. When we swear an oath and enlist God as a witness, we'd better tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth knowing that he really is there and that he really does care about our truthfulness and our witness.

Second, we should never enlist God's name to further our own agenda or ideas. We're often guilty of appealing to God to give our own ideas more authority than they might have on their own. I think we see this particularly in the political realm. There are some things in the political realm that Christians can take a stand on, saying, "Thus saith the Lord". Abortion, for example, is everywhere and always wrong. Marriage is between a man and a woman. Deliberately killing innocent non-combatants in war is immoral. But not everything is that clear. I'm one of those "Taxation is theft" guys and I believe very firmly that my position on economics and taxation and government are rooted in biblical principles. But I have an English friend who is an ardent Socialist who, on economic issues, is left of Lenin. And he's a Christian and can give you biblical arguments for his views—and he *will*. I think he'd dead wrong, but I also grant that these are issues on which faithful Christians can come to different conclusions. We can appeal to the Bible—and we should—when arguing these issues, but where we get into trouble is when we start declaring "Thus saith the Lord" (which my friend does quite often). Brothers and Sisters, we need to be circumspect about claiming authority for *our* ideas by invoking God's good name.

A third application sort of brings these two points together—using God's name to promote falsehood and to promote our own agenda—is false prophecy. Now, this kind of shakes out in two ways. First, there are the people who actually claim to be prophets and to speak the word of the Lord, but speak falsely. This might be the more serious of the two and it is remarkable to me how lightly many in the church take these things, whether it's the well-known people with big ministries who repeatedly make false predictions or teach false doctrine while money continues to pour in from supporters, or ordinary pastors and

churchpeople who claim to speak for the Lord and do the same thing, prophesying things that don't come to pass or teaching false doctrine. A friend of mine left a local church a few years ago and when I asked him why, this was the reason. People were claiming to be speaking prophecies from the Lord on a regular basis, but none of it was ever true and the church never addressed it. Brothers and Sisters, that sort of thing profanes the name of the Lord. It destroyed my friend's faith. This sort of Christianity was the only Christianity he ever knew and, when the prophecies never panned out, it didn't occur to him that that people were false; he concluded that God either isn't real or doesn't care.

But this often happens in more subtle ways. It happens when we say things like, "God told me..." "God told me to marry this person" or "God told me to buy this house" or "God told me go on this mission trip". I've heard church leaders do this: "God has told us to build a new building" or "God has told us to make such-and-such change to our bylaws". Now, the Holy Spirit may sometimes give us a nudge, but we need to be careful how we use God's name in this way. We may have thought something through, weighed as best we can what the Bible says or how godly principles apply to the situation—and we should always do that—but saying "God told me" in order to add weight or authority to our plans is to profane the name of the Lord.

But it's not just the outright "God told me" that's a problem. We can profane the name of the Lord when we claim to quickly to speak for him. This weighs on me heavily as a pastor. I have an obligation to teach you the Lord's word and that means that whatever I say must, to the best of my ability, accurately represent his word. I do my best. I study a lot. But I'm not perfect. Maybe twenty or thirty percent of what I tell on a

controversial subject might be wrong. (The problem is that I don't know which twenty or third percent.) I have an obligation to do my best when it comes to teaching God's word and to be grounded in serious study and real scholarship. But it's not just me, every Christian has a duty to be sober about God's word that we not bring ridicule on it.

When I visiting my parents, my dad took me out to breakfast with some men from his church. I sat next to a guy who spent most of the time telling me in great earnestness about his belief in aliens and alien abductions based on certain passages from Genesis. There's a guy I run into in town periodically who, every time I see him, insists on telling in great earnest about what he calls "The Bible Code". It's kooky conspiracy theory stuff. And there's another guy who, every time I see him, is holding onto someone's arm and pontificating on his bizarre "end times" theories. Brothers and Sisters, these sorts of things discredit God's people, they discredit his word, and they indirectly profane his name. We need to be serious and sober about God's word, not infants tossed to and fro and chasing after every wave of faddish or sensational teaching.

Now, lastly, the Third Commandment prohibit invoking God's name for magical purposes. Surely that's not a problem for us? Is it? Well, it is. Not that long ago I was at a meeting and we were praying. When the prayer time was over, one man walked across the room to another man and said, "You didn't say, 'In Jesus' name'. Your prayer wont' come true." Brothers and Sister, prayers aren't wishes and we don't pray "in Jesus name" as a way to invoke his power or authority to make things happen. We pray *through* Jesus. Notice that that's how our collects put it. Christian prayer is addressed to the Father and we make that address through Jesus the Son who is our reconciling

intermediary. Adding that last bit to our prayers doesn't make them any more effective than adding "O Father" at the beginning. Whether or not we add that reminder at the end of our prayers, all Christian prayer is to the Father and through Jesus. Adding Jesus to the end of our prayers is a reminder that he is our mediator. To use it as an invocation of his power or authority is profane his name by using it as a sort of magical talisman. It's to summon Jesus to our agenda rather than submitting to his good and sovereign will.

So, while we may tell God our wants and desires, our prayers ought to acknowledge God's will in the belief that his knowledge goes for beyond ours and that his, and only his plans are perfect. We must never invoke his name as if we can command him to fulfil our own agenda or obey our commands. This is a key component of the Word of Faith heresy and its teaching about "positive confession". If you have faith, it teaches, your words create reality. This isn't Christianity. This is just a baptised version of the old New Thought movement which is itself a modern version of the magic ancient people thought they could perform by saying the right words or invoking the name of a god. Brothers and Sisters, we cannot control or command the Lord. Instead we come to him in faith with our petitions and trust in his perfect wisdom and goodness, submitting to his will and his agenda.

Again, we are his people. Our calling and vocation is to make known the Lord to the nations. We honour God's name when we honour him and we do so especially when we show him honour before the watching eyes of the world. It ought to be our priority. The first petition in the Lord's Prayer is "hallowed be thy name". This is how we hallow his name. I'll just close with what Martin Luther wrote in his Small Catechism. It may just be the

best short summary of our Christian duty in light of this commandment.

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain.

What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we may not curse, swear, use witchcraft, lie, or deceive by his name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks."

Let us pray: Gracious Father, through Jesus and the Spirit you have made us your people. You indwell us. You make us your temple. When the world looks to us, it ought to see you present in our midst. We confess and ask forgiveness for all the times when we fail to take this calling seriously. We confess the times when we profane your name by representing you poorly before the watching world. Forgive us we ask. Renew us with your grace. Focus our hearts and minds on you. As we think of your goodness and wisdom and as we reflect on your great love seen so dramatically in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, by your grace, may love for you well up and overflow from our hearts. And may that love manifest itself as we hallow your name in all that we say and in all that we do. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.