What's In a Name?
September 20, 2026

Introduction
Names are important in that they help us to identify someone rightly. There's something dangerous about mistaken identity. Jeremy Pretto and I have wives who share the same name (different spelling). So often when we're talking to each other about something and we mention one of our wives by name, we have to signify by saying "My Kari" or "your Carrie". Getting the wrong name can be a problem and acting in the right name wrongly can be equally problematic.

So far we've considered the first and second commandments. The first being "*You shall have no other gods before me*" and the second being "*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.*" If we treat these as standalones, we might miss the ascending emphasis on God's glory. Many of you are probably familiar with an encounter Jesus had in Matthew 22:35–40 (in fact, all three synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke, record a variation of this encounter. Matthew's gospel says, "*And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*" This frames for us a proper understanding of the law of God and especially the Ten Commandments. Some theologians even see the division of this distillation being 1-5 and 6-10; seeing in the first 5 a proper understanding of God's authority, including in how we revere our parents and in the second five a right orientation of our relationship with our neighbors. Our neighbors, of course, according to Jesus, really being our fellow man as illustrated in the parable of the good samaritan.

I mention all of this because it's important to think about the third commandment within the framework of our call to love the Lord with all our hearts, souls and minds.

Exodus 20:7
Many of us simply think of the really big violation of this commandment when we read it. I think you probably know what I'm talking about; the curse word that just stings our ears on its hearing. While that is certainly a violation thereof, it is not the only way to think about violating the third commandment. A helpful place to go to help bring some clarity and application to the commandments is in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and that sermon helps us think some through the third.

We take God's name in vain when we fail to revere Him
Teaching us how to pray, Jesus opens with the reverence due God's name by acknowledging that God's name is "*hallowed*" or to be revered (Matthew 6:9). I'll be honest, I think the diminishing sense of reverence in our culture has the (maybe) unintended consequence of diminishing our reverence for God. You've heard me speak of the 1999 movie, *Dogma, in which* two fallen angels seek to exploit a loophole in Catholic doctrine in order to return to Heaven. I'll save you the commentary and the interpretation, but know that the loophole they seek to exploit is the rededication of a Catholic church in the renewed image of Jesus developed by Cardinal

Glick called "*the Buddy Christ*", a smiling winking Jesus giving everyone a benevolent thumbs up as if to say, you're ok. The aim of which was to rid the church of the depressing crucifix and present a more uplifting idea of Jesus. What was an absurdist satire almost 30 years ago was kind of a prophetic outlook on the lack of reverence among American Christians. American Evangelicalism, especially, far prefers to think of the incarnation of God in Christ in casual and friendly terms instead of against the backdrop of our need for a Savior who has been touched with all our infirmities and temptations, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). Certainly, the love of Christ drew sinners to him, but not merely for a good hang, but for redemption and forgiveness.

Philippians 2:5-8 describes the humility of Christ as releasing His hold on the equality with God that He enjoyed in order that He might be sacrificed in death, even a death on the cross. Paul doesn't end there, however. Verses 9 through 11 drive the point home: "*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" (Philippians 2:9–11) Far too often we imagine the incarnate dusty-footed Jesus of Nazareth from the gospels and forget about the, "*one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength*" of Revelation 1 who, when John, "*...saw him..fell at his feet as though dead.*" We properly revere God when we hold these images in proper balance, for it was this same Son of Man who, "*laid his right hand on [John]...saying, "Fear not…*" (Revelation 1:13–17)

We take God's name in vain when we leverage it for our own ends

I've long thought that the greatest dishonor we perform in relation to God is trying to recruit Him onto our team. For some, "choosing" God is like an old schoolyard pick where we survey the landscape of available options and we choose the one that we estimate will give us the best chance of defeating our opponent. Frankly, too much modern Christian motivational speaking and encouragement is filled with this sort of individualistic thinking about God and His designs. Without a doubt, God is on the side of His people. He defends us against wrongdoers, He comforts us in the midst of strife and brokenheartedness, He has defeated death on our behalf, etc. That's not what I'm talking about, though. I'm talking about the justification of sin and wrongdoing in the name of God in order to justify oneself and one's own aims. Let me give you a few examples:

- When we seek to justify our sin in the name of God. I've heard all kinds of things justified against the backdrop of "*God's will*"; things like unforgiveness, divorce, questionable business practices, leaving a church for the wrong reasons, etc. When someone tells you that God told them to do something, pay attention because it's probably something that goes against the character of God and falls more in line with their preferences and personal desires. Admittedly, that is a broad brush generalization, but my point is to make sure that we aren't using God to get what we want. Time doesn't permit me to unpack my theories around this, nor is this the context, but we, as followers of God in

Christ, should be really careful not to attribute to God's will anything that isn't a) clearly revealed in Scripture, b) a consistent application of what is clearly revealed in scripture or c) clearly forbidden in Scripture. – SAY THOSE AGAIN

- False teachers leverage the name of God to their evil ends. This is nothing new in the religious landscape. Imagine the spiritual leverage that comes with the notion that someone is the man of God. False teachers claim the name of God or of Jesus in order to take advantage of the flock of God. Ezekiel 34:1-10 holds damning words for false teachers who claim the name of God.

  Ezekiel 34:1–10…*The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.*

  "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. (ESV)

  These are chilling words for those claiming the name of Christ while getting wealthy off the backs of God's people. Deuteronomy 18:22 equips God's people with discernment about these men by warning, "*when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.*"

- Swearing in His name falsely is another way in which we may leverage God's name for our own ends. This is probably considered to be a natural extension of the first two because it often represents the double down or the Trump card that tries to prove our sincerity. In fact, lots of theologians consider the prohibition in the third commandment to be primarily a cultural requirement because in the ancient Near East, it was customary that you would invoke the name of your God to make judicial and promissory oaths. In

other words, business and legal contracts were bound by swearing in the name of your god and Israel's God wanted His people to reflect His character by being like their God in the keeping of their word. In Jesus' sermon on the mount, again, He helps to bring simplicity to this understanding by simply stating, "*Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'* [citing Leviticus 19:12] *But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.*" (Matthew 5:33–37) Here in the third commandment, "*Yahweh is warning Israel against using his name as if it were disconnected from his person, presence, and power.*" (ESV Study Bible Notes – Exodus)

Hosea indicted Israel with the words, "*They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants; so judgment springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.*" (Hosea 10:4) God's people are to be different, however. As one author put it, "*When you make a declaration, swearing by God's name, it must not be a false promise or one you do not intend to keep*" (DeYoung, Kevin, *What Does It Really Mean to Take the Lord's Name In Vain?*) 20:7)

Conclusion

The prohibition of the third commandment is not against ever speaking the name of God. Christianity is not like Islam in that we understand the power of the name of God, but we also understand that God's glory doesn't prevent intimacy.

In Exodus 3, when Moses encountered God in the burning bush and was instructed to go tell Pharaoh to set God's people free, he asked a simple question, "*Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'*" (Exodus 3:13) How did God respond? He told Moses His name. "*God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'*" (Exodus 3:14)

As God's people, we bear His name and, in bearing His name, we are called to remember His being, His essence, His character, etc. By observing us, onlookers should get a clearer, unvarnished look at who God is and what it means to be one of His people. In essence, we carry the name of God with us into the world and we should not carry it in vain.