

EXODUS

תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה

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Exodus 20:7 The Third Commandment Taking God's Name in Vain

When I was a kid in youth group at 13 years old, a message I often heard was that the Christian life doesn't have to be boring like you might expect, but can actually be a life where we have adventure, enjoy the world God made, and live for our deepest joys. Which is all true. So we threw off a lot of unnecessary rules, and learned to enjoy God and his world again, which is all good.

We threw a lot of unnecessary weight overboard, we unburdened the ship of our lives and chucked the old man-made rules and regulations and fuddy-duddy-ality overboard, and good riddance. We spread our sails, and learned to have joy again. Our ships became lighter, Christianity became lighter, and we were unburdened in many good ways.

But in the process we threw something else overboard. And that was not just the unnecessary weight of rules and regulations and dour fuddy-duddiness - but an important weight. We also threw out the ballast that the ship of our lives needed.

And our Christianity became so light that it became unstable like a boat with no ballast. It is now easily blown around by the culture, easily swayed from important truths, and for many our faith capsizes very easily now. The winds shift and what we believe is no longer popular so we capsize, or real

suffering comes and that wind knocks our faith over. Or life and marriage are harder than we thought they would be if we followed Jesus, so our weightless faith tips over.

In some ways, we overcorrected, and if we're going to have a faith that continues through cultural change and difficulty, we need our ballast back. Not the unnecessary rules and man-made religion, those things can sink to the bottom of the ocean.

But the stabilizing weight of a sense of the awesomeness of God in our lives, his greatness, his holiness, his otherness, his power - we need that again if our faith will thrive and if we'll be the unique people of God who live like He is real and has intervened in our lives.

When we talk about the glory of God, the Hebrew word *kabod* is the word that is translated glory, and it literally means "weight." And we certainly don't need man-made religion to give our faith weight again. But we do need God, and his character, his holiness, his grace, his purity, his perfection, his power, his wisdom, and his real presence with us to restore our ballast.

We started the ten commandments a couple of weeks ago saying that God gave us laws so we would know Him and his nature better, so we would run to him as our savior and so we would be guided by his commands.

When we really get who God is and that He has rescued us and we live accordingly, that puts a right amount of ballast in the boat. Not religious weight, but the kind of rightly placed importance and meaning that the world is hungry for.

We looked at man-made, rules based religion and said, "Nobody wants this, this doesn't help anybody." And we were right to chuck it so we could invite people to something better. But the alternative to that is not a weightless,

god-less, religion where we make everything cool and offer really relevant steps for better living that you can get in memes online. It isn't to make everything light. People already have light! We already have meaninglessness. Scrolling through social media for 30 minutes is the mental equivalent to eating a case of twinkies - you feel full of empty calories and regret.

So the hope today it to look to God, to know better who this God is who has rescued us, to see the ways we treat him like he is not weighty, and repent well so we can have boats with sails and ballast. And something meaningful and other to offer to a world that needs weight.

In the beginning of the Exodus story, God came to Moses to begin his process of revealing Himself to His people, showing them His glory, and rescuing them from Egypt. And if you remember the scene at the burning bush, when God tells Moses to go to the people to rescue them, Moses asks Him, "Who should I say sent me?"

Exodus 3: 14 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.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, 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, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

So God reveals Himself as "I am," or "Yahweh," The God who is. He is self-existent, He is self-sustaining, He exists eternally. He tells Moses the name of God to use.

Now the Jews had used that name for God before. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all called God by that name. Moses' mother's name was Jochebed, which means "Yahweh's glory." This wasn't totally new info God was giving Moses. He was calling something to remembrance.

God reminds him of his **NAME**, the name the forefathers used.

And a name is a pointer to a person's life achievements. Who a person is is all wrapped up in their name. If I say, "Tom Brady," his whole reputation with all of his achievements comes to mind. If I say Martin Luther King, elements of his reputation come to mind. If I name a movie star like Chris Pratt, movies come to mind, his work comes to mind.

The name is like the link you click to see all that a person is.

The name of God brings with it the whole reputation of God. It represents Him and all He is and all He has done.

This is why the scriptures spend so much time pointing out the glory - or the weight - of the name of God, because it sums up who He is:

Psalm 20:7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

Psalm 23 says that because of His reputation of being a God who shepherds His people, because of his desire to "maintain His good name," He leads us:

Psalm 23:3 - He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

His reputation as a forgiving God is the reason He forgives us:

Psalm 25:11 - For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

The first request Jesus taught us to make in the Lord's prayer is "hallowed be your name" in Matthew 6:9 - may your name be kept holy.

Acts 4:12 “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Not just any god saves, there is salvation in no other name, no other reputation.

But for all who do turn to Him:

Romans 10:13 “For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Any who appeal to Him and what He has done on the cross and His reputation of forgiving and restoring will be saved.

And at the end of time:

Philippians 2:10-11 “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ‘in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The glory of God is summed up in His name. And because that name is the link we click to reveal God’s attributes and reputation, He gives this third commandment in Exodus 20:7:

Exodus 20:7 “7 “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.”

God’s name is a holy thing, so He commands us not to take it in vain.

This is literally, “Don’t raise up His name to no good.”¹ Or don’t use His name in an empty way. Don’t take the weight and glory of His name and use it in useless ways.

We do this in two major ways: ways that are frivolous and ways that are false.²

Frivolous Uses of God’s Name

1) Profanity

I learned growing up that we were taking God’s name in vain if we said, “Oh my God,” or “Jesus Christ” as a swear-word. And that’s definitely true. Because Christians are people who worship God and revere God, we are not people who use His name that way.

That’s using a weighty name in a non-weighty manner. That’s like using a blowtorch to light birthday candles - that’s not what that power is supposed to be used for.

I know we need some word to say when we hit our thumbs with a hammer. But not God’s name. So when we say, “My God, Jesus Christ, G-d, or the more creative variations of OMG, we’re taking this amazing name and using it for a worthless purpose.

But there are a lot of other ways we make God’s name a very frivolous and light thing.

2) Goofiness

God is not someone we joke about.

¹ Douglas Stuart, New American Commentary on Exodus, (Nashville: B&H, 2006,) 455.

² Kevin DeYoung, in his book, The Ten Commandments, uses these two categories plus a third, “phony.”

Now I want to make clear, there's a lot to laugh at in the world, lots to laugh at in church. It's fine for church to be a place where you laugh, and for teachers of the Bible to be funny at times.

I hope there's lots of laughter among God's people. There are funny things in life and in the bible and in creation.

If you take kids to the zoo and they see baboons for the first time, they will laugh and snicker. I think they were created to look the way they look for God to show that humor is part of His design for things.

And one of the bi-products of coming to believe the Gospel is a freedom to laugh.

If we are religious, believing our worth and our acceptance before God depend on our working hard to keep it all up, that pressure and uncertainty will keep us from joy. We have to stay focused, otherwise we're going to lose out on life.

But the Gospel says, "You already blew that, so Jesus carried the load for you. He perfectly obeyed, He earned for you the Father's acceptance, and when He is yours by faith you can't lose that. The weight of sin is lifted, and one consequence of our being unburdened by the gospel is that we become free to laugh. You can't take yourself too seriously if you believe Christian doctrine.

All of the easily-offended, "I'm a big deal" posturing goes out the window. When pride gets dissolved we can joke with each other. Laughter and lightness and not taking ourselves too seriously and being pretty hard to offend are all results of believing the Gospel. When you don't care about always defending your own reputation (because you know you're worse

than anyone thinks you are anyways), you can laugh even at the jokes that you're the butt of.

A sure sign of sinful pride is inability to laugh.

Now believing the gospel doesn't make you funny. Some people are absolutely hopeless when it comes to being funny and shouldn't try. But it does make you humble. And humility frees you to laugh.

And part of what Jesus is doing is turning the weeping of today into the laughter of tomorrow. He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."

John Wesley preached that "a sour religion is the devil's religion."

So we as Christians will grow into more humble, more light, more difficult-to-offend, more prone to laugh at ourselves people.

But we all know there are certain weighty things we would never joke about. There is so much we can joke about, but certain things are off limits.*

And because God is infinitely weighty, we shouldn't make him into the punch-line in a cute joke.

I've sat through sermons where it was so painfully goofy - complete with puns about God and thick Christian cheesiness and slapstick humor - that the pastor might as well be wearing clown shoes and a nose - and is intentionally making a joke out of everything. And someone comes in looking for something different, and they say, "I might as well just have watched netflix if I wanted meaningless drivel and a comedy routine. My heart is longing for something other."

God is a weighty God. Believing the gospel frees me to not take myself seriously, but believing the Gospel reminds me to take God deadly-seriously.

We shouldn't make a weighty God seem like a light thing with our words, we shouldn't make a Holy God cutesy.

We take God's name in vain when we're frivolous with it, but also when we're false with it.

False Uses of God's Name

1) We'll falsely justify our sins with it. I decided to do this thing that I know is wrong, but "God gave me peace about this. God wants me to be happy. He's a God of love." So God's name becomes the stamp of approval on a decision that his Bible is against.

I'm doing this thing that makes my happy. God wants me to be happy. Therefore that thing is God's will. It's fraud.

2) We also use it falsely when we want to bring weight to a decision we've made.

Among Christians, there seems to be a fear of admitting uncertainty.

We seem to be afraid of saying, "I've thought and prayed and sought counsel, and now I'm going to try something. Now I'm going to take a risk."

We feel pressured almost to say, "God told me to do this." If God told you to do something, say that. But if his leadership hasn't been that specific, there's nothing wrong with saying, "This seems good."

And when we are too quick to say, "God told me to do something," we actually shut ourselves off from wisdom that could help us.

What I mean is this. I meet with people often who are trying to discern what God would have them do, and I love that part of the job - to be able to go to scripture and teach how it speaks to a situation, to help someone think through a decision.

So if you come in and you say, "It is time for a career change, and God is telling me to take this job. What do you think?"

My only answer to that is, "You should take the job." I have nothing else to say at that point - if God told you, that's your answer. Unless it clearly contradicts the Bible, in which case I can just say, "No God didn't tell you to do that," there's nothing left to be said if God already told you. I can't say, "OK, God told you to do it, that's one reason to take it, but let's think of some reasons not to." I can come up with 100 reasons not to, but if God said to do it it doesn't matter. You do what he wants. I can come up with 10 good reasons Gideon should not deplete the size of his army before the battle. But God told him to do it, so my reasons don't matter.

But if the approach is more humble, "I'm trying to figure out if it would be wise to take this job," then we're talking it out, making some lists of pros and cons, looking at the opportunity, looking at other opportunities, talking about whether it's a fit for your talents and passions. You're open to more wisdom that way.

So if God hasn't clearly told you, don't say he has. That's misusing his name.

And there's nothing unspiritual about us making all kinds of decisions without direct revelation from God about that decision.

If the Bible hasn't clearly spoken to a decision, there is no shame in saying, "I'm not sure what to do in this situation." And it's often admitting the fact that we're not sure that opens us up to the wisdom we need from others.

It's fine to not be sure.

So we'll use it deceptively to legitimize our decisions.

3) And also, in Christian circles, we use it **falsely to impress people:**

In the classroom setting of one Peanuts comic strip, on the first day of the new school year, the students were told to write an essay about returning to class. In her essay, Lucy wrote, 'Vacations are nice, but it's good to get back to school. There is nothing more satisfying or challenging than education, and I look forward to a year of expanding my knowledge.'

Lucy's teacher complimented her essay. In the final frame, Lucy leans over to Charlie Brown and says, 'After a while, you learn what sells.'

And that's true in church. After awhile, you learn what sells. What kind of speech impresses other Christians. God talk that works for you. Name dropping God to get you somewhere.

Christian single guys - you learn very quickly that a godly girl who wants to marry wants a godly guy. And after awhile, you learn what sells. You can Jesus-ify your ordinary conversation and you might find that it sparks the kind of interest you're after.

Jesus's name is not a good luck charm we use to get something out of or to make our profile look more attractive on match.com.

Now we should be people who talk about God alot. This is not ammo to shoot and judge other people with, and definitely not grounds for mocking

the guy who always talks about Jesus. We don't know their motives, so we assume the best.

But we want to become people who are increasingly sincere and devoted to Jesus, not just people who learn what sells.

4) We use it falsely to manipulate people

Guys looking for a woman will sometimes feign Christian living to get her.

Politicians whose lives don't look anything like Christian lives, people in both parties, know that if they drop God's name, they'll get votes. They're using His name falsely to gain something.

And the only ones worse than politicians at this are pastors.

We'll say things like, "God said you should do this."

Now I do think we have the right to say that if the Bible is clear. God doesn't want you to lie, God doesn't want you to steal, and it's fine to say this is God's will when it's very clear from the Bible.

But we have to be careful of this as church leaders. Because we are always needing workers and teachers and help. It's fine to say things like, "God wants you to serve him." It's fine to say, "It seems you'd be a good fit for this, try it out."

But it is never OK to say, "God wants you to do this thing" to manipulate someone to do it unless there is clear revelation from Him in scripture.

5) We'll use his name falsely when we carry his name (as Christians) but live or teach opposed to His name.

Every Christian carries the name, "Christ." Christian means "little Christ." And when those who are called by his name live in ways that are diametrically opposed to Christ and what he stands for, we are taking his name in vain.

This is why occasionally a faithful church will remove someone from membership, so that we together don't take His name in vain.

6) We'll use His name falsely we cut corners in His worship and service but still say we are serving God.

In Malachi 1, there was a time when the priests were taking God's name in vain by offering polluted sacrifices. They were sacrificing the worst of the animals (blind and sick animals) so they could say they worshipped. They did as little as possible in service of God.

Malachi 1 ⁶ "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' ⁷ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. ⁸ When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. ¹¹ For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will

be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. 12 But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised.

When we are called by God's name and worship in God's name, but the sacrifices we make are miniscule and not fitting a king: we don't give in any significant way of our time, our money, our energy, our calendar, but still say we live life in service of God. It is to take his name which is great, give lip service to it, but treat it like its small. And God says, "You're profaning my name. Would you serve a governor that way? Would you treat a ruler that way? A celebrity you admire?"

But we can get very cynical in our worship, thinking it is no small thing if we go through the minimum motions.

Contrast this with Jesus who came to glorify God when God's name and reputation were at stake.

There was a massive problem. God is love. And God is just.

If God were to act only on his justice, He would send everyone to hell. That would be a just punishment for a life of sin against an eternal and Holy God. But He had said that He was going to lead a people in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. He staked His reputation on the redemption of some people.

So maybe He could act only on His love. And just pardon the sin of the people He had chosen. Just let it go. But His name is holy. And what kind of judge declares every guilty person innocent.

God's name was at stake no matter what He did.

So Jesus came, in earnest pursuit of the glory of God's name:

Romans 3:21-26 "21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Jesus came and died as a propitiation, as an atoning sacrifice. So God was able to act on His perfect justice and His perfect love.

God's perfect justice demanded that every sin would be paid for, and Jesus paid for every sin of those who would believe in Him. A full and complete payment was made.

God's perfect love demanded that He pardon a people for His name's sake and call an unrighteous people righteous. But with the demands of His justice satisfied, God could not satisfy the demands of His love, and could justify the ones who have faith in Jesus.

On the cross He showed Himself to be perfectly just and perfectly loving.

Jesus came to honor the name of His Father, and He did it perfectly.

The solution to our unrighteousness, our legal guilt before God, is that the judge declares the wicked righteous.

His justifying us means not only that He forgives us and lets us go without punishment, but He also gives us His righteousness and virtue. We are declared just by God, not because we were able to do enough, but because He was able to do enough, and we receive Him by faith. Not by doing, not by changing, just by believing.

And when we believe, He gives us an alien righteousness. A credit to our account from the account of Jesus.³

We failed to provide the obedience that the law required, so Jesus provided it. We failed to honor God's name, so Jesus honored it.

He alone uniquely obeyed God's commands. He suffered on the cross, completely undeserving. And because He was God, his sacrifice was an infinite one. His death could pay the price for his people.

He was a propitiation, a sacrifice that can atone, and make it possible for God to justly forgive and bless us.

Only Christ could be that atoning sacrifice for us.

He came and took our place.

African scholar Athanasius wrote that *"He became what we are that He might make us what He is."*⁴

³ See also Philippians 3:9 "and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith"

⁴ Athanasius, The Incarnation of the Word, Trans. by Rev. A. Robertson.

Scriptures Referenced:

Exodus 3:14-15

Psalms 20:7

Psalms 23:3

Psalms 25:11

Acts 4:12

Romans 10:13

Philippians 2:10-11

Exodus 20:7

Malachi 1:6-12

Romans 3:21-26

Notes:

Exodus 4:7

The Third Commandment

Taking God's Name in Vain

- I. Frivolous Uses of His Name*
- II. False Uses of His Name*

Questions for Discussion in Small Groups:

1. Why is God concerned that we treat His name with honor?
2. What kinds of joking honor God? What kinds are off-limits?
3. Why should we be careful saying, "God told me..."?
4. How were the priests in Malachi 1 dishonoring God's name? Do we sin like they did?
5. How did Christ pursue the worth of His Father's name?