

Defaming the Name Exodus 20:7

A church member years ago told us the story of his brother's unusual name: Delassone. He received that name because his parents were committed to making sure that he would be their last child in a line of several children. Delassone would surely be *da' last one*. The unusual name and the commitment behind it are funny enough. But maybe you can imagine the outburst when the punch line landed that Delassone would eventually have younger siblings—plural! I'm sure Delassone has grown tired of repeating how he came to be named such, but I doubt that people ever tire of hearing the rib-tickling irony attached to his name.

Maybe your name didn't come with that much comedic drama. Most of us came to be called our names out of forethought, tradition, or due to something meaningful to your mother or father.¹ Choosing a name for a child is often painstaking simply because names matter. So, parents dig through baby name books. They scour 1 Chronicles. They take into consideration the names they've already used, or the ones they dare not use because of some connotation. Maybe a past life event, or even the physical presentation of the newborn directs them to a fitting name. Although Western culture generally places less emphasis on the literal meaning of names than the ancient biblical world did, it's not like names aren't important to your neighbor. Names identify us, connect us to families, and become closely associated with one's identity and reputation.

And it's always instructive to remember that we gave zero input as to what we were named. Naming is, in fact, from a human standpoint, based on someone else's freedom and authority. In most cases, that of the parents. A striking contrast concerning God, however, is that He named Himself, and in time relayed that name to a people. The exchange between Moses and Yahweh in Exodus 3 unveils the fact. God naming Himself was a sign of His freedom and authority, which are ultimate and sovereign.² Unlike a child's first day in kindergarten, no one forced God's hand to reveal His name. Indeed, none possess such ability. He told us His name. His name matters. His name matters most of all. And how we live in light of His name is the concern before us now.

I. The Significance of God's Name

As we transition into this third commandment, we might be helped by following the observation of one scholar who noted that the second command, on some level, prohibits worshiping God through visual representations. He could never be sufficiently expressed in all His glory and majesty through those kinds of attempts. But a step past seeking to represent Him visually, the third commandment digs down into *verbal* representations of God, whose roots run much deeper than what proceeds from one's mouth.³ How we speak of Him is important to Him, and if we're in the right frame, we look to adopt what is important to Him.

Thankfully, we know God because God has made Himself known through His Word. He has opened your eyes to His Person and His works, which reflect His glorious nature and character. To the extent that we know this God, we also know how we've come into this position of such

¹ My mother named me after Christopher Robin from the Winnie the Pooh book series, though my terrible love for sweets brings me closer to favoring Winnie more than Christopher. ©

² Philip Ryken, *Preaching the Word: Exodus*, 577.

³ T. Desmond Alexander, *AOTC: Exodus*, 408.

wonderful knowledge, reflected in Jesus' words to Peter long ago, "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you [that is, the who of Jesus] but my Father who is in heaven.*"⁴ We didn't come to know what we know by an unusually elevated intelligence quotient. God is the One who turned on the light switch of truth to our minds.⁵

The book of Exodus begins by showing us that among Israel, indeed in the ancient world at that time, there was a universal ignorance of God.⁶ It's why Moses asked the LORD for His name in chapter 3, and it's why Pharaoh asked in chapter five, "*Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice and let Israel go?*" We see God answering Moses. "*I Am who I Am*"—Yahweh, the LORD. That name was illustrated by a fireproof bush not in need of the usual elements to stay burning bright. Like it, the LORD before Moses needed nothing to exist or to act or to speak. He is supreme, utterly independent, wholly self-sufficient. He needed and needs nothing to spur Him to thought or communication. Nothing adds to His worth or importance. And I couldn't state those truths without God disclosing the name which meant those things. God revealed His name to enthrall His people with His glory and to show them that He graciously desires to be known in truth. Those realities surely help us make sense as to the purpose of this specific command. Before we can represent God truly with our lips or our lives, He must reveal Himself as He truly is.

This theme of God's name courses through the whole of Scripture like an immense river. It is massive in scope because God's name is massive in significance. Matt's quote of A. W. Tozer last week, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" rings true. But there is hardly a dip on the importance meter when we move from our thoughts of God to our expressions about God. Both matter profoundly.

II. The Misuse of God's Name

In some sense, the truth of divine jealousy is still on this first table of the law here. Who we worship and how we worship are great concerns to the LORD. And because all ten of these commandments given to Moses are inextricably intertwined, God's divine jealousy extends into this third commandment by instructions on the use of His name.⁷ How we envision God is of great importance, but so is how we speak of Him and how one hears of Him and understands Him through us. Thus, the command, ***You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain...***

Many have sold this third commandment woefully short by viewing it as that which merely relates to what one might say after a moving hammer finds one's thumb instead of the intended nail. Taking up God's name in a moment of anger or frustration is, of course, one way to break this command. The LORD cares about what comes out of our mouths at all times.⁸ However, as with every command, God has attached them to the great probe of the Holy Spirit to search the thoughts and intentions of hearts.

⁴ Matthew 16:17

⁵ This posture is behind Paul's words in 1 Cor. 1:30-31, which are rooted in Jeremiah 9:23-24.

⁶ Ross Blackburn, *NSBT: The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 34. Also, Shai Linne, "The Solus Christus Project: *My Portion*," 2005.

⁷ The Isaiah 42 passage referred to last week in Matt's sermon speaks also of God being jealous of His Name.

⁸ Matthew 12:36, "*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak...*"

The word *vain* here signifies something empty, or something used for no good purpose.⁹ With this, the verb *take* conveys the meaning of “to carry, or to bear.”¹⁰ We’ll see this same language again in Exodus 28 with reference to Aaron the priest bearing the names of the sons of Israel on the shoulders of his ephod. So, the idea here is the prohibition of bearing God’s name in a meaningless or hollow way, or in a way that serves selfish aims and interests.

I recall on many occasions growing up when my friends and I would use the phrase, “I promise to God.” Though my friend didn’t believe me when I told him, “I didn’t steal your baseball,” following up on his skepticism with that pointed, heavenward promise seemed to almost settle the matter. It was a serious thing to do, and a way to get someone to believe you even if the truth was nowhere on the radar. This manipulation worked among my ragtag friends. Though we were mostly oblivious to the seriousness of this promise, we were bearing God’s name with insincerity and often with no honest intentions. We were using God’s name to our self-directed advantage. From our hearts to our lips, the name of God, far from being hallowed, was ringing hollow.

Yet this is not merely something motley boys do mindlessly playing baseball. You’re likely familiar with the words of a courtroom deputy or bailiff, “Please raise your right hand. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” Now, whatever one might think about the jurisprudence of such an oath within our own law courts, humans have certainly mimicked the whole scene *outside* the courtroom and *inside* their own personal contexts and circumstances. That is, a pattern of fallen humanity is to attach their claims to, or to make an oath with the supposed endorsement of God Himself. But leveraging deities isn’t unique to the twenty-first century.

The practice of oaths by the time Jesus’ day rolled around was so corrupted and abused that He set a different bar altogether. In Matthew 5, in the context of oath-taking, Jesus says, “*Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.*”¹¹ In other words, there was no reason to appeal to God when speaking to others. Why? Because, back to the sense of the verb *take*, there’s never a time when God’s people fail to *bear* God’s name wherever they go, in whatever they say. *How will I bear it* is the more pressing question.

We’ve heard the abuses in our own contexts. People claiming to know the LORD using His name to further purposes that have little or nothing to do with Him. From business maneuvers to political parties to social causes and more, we hear the claims that God is on that side, but not on that side. However, to my own shame I, too, have borne God’s name poorly; professing God’s glory only to then peddle my own. If you’re a believer, you’ve known the sting of playing the fraud as well. I’m thankful for the great gift from heaven called repentance, and what grace God has given in those subsequent moments of honesty before Him. Indeed, “*He restores my soul.*”¹²

Again, this duplicity is an aged one. The self-proclaimed prophets of Jeremiah’s day maintained that they were speaking on God’s behalf.¹³ They took up the name of God to make an authoritative claim, and this kind of sin would persist in peppering the moral landscape of Israel through the

⁹ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 455.

¹⁰ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenants*, 342.

¹¹ Matthew 5:37

¹² Psalm 23:3

¹³ Jeremiah 23:25

ages. When we turn our attention back to Exodus, Israel had lived underneath such pagan appeals to deities for centuries in Egypt. A legal inscription was discovered on an ancient Egyptian tomb in the late 1800s. This engraving expressed a widely used, centuries-long formula involving taking vows and oaths. It reads, “As Amun endures, if I speak falsehood, may my nose and ears be cut off, and may I be sent to Kush.”¹⁴ It’s not a stretch to say that people standing at the base of Sinai would have known this god named Amun-Re who was considered king of the gods around the time of Moses.¹⁵ Using a powerful name to prove one’s case or to make one look trustworthy would have been a real temptation for Israel. They heard that kind of wording for 400-plus years. And now, delivered by their true God, you could see how they might be tempted to bandy about Yahweh’s name in similar ways.

Yet, in this third command God was establishing a standard and being crystal clear about it. He would not be relegated to the status of a casual deity serving human whims, a kind of lucky rabbit’s foot. No, either this true God would be truly honored by His people, or they would pay the price for being cavalier with His name.

III. The Vindication of God’s Name

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. Again, Yahweh’s name signified His essence and character. To speak God’s name was an acknowledgment of all He is in His holiness. He is all He is, at all times. In our theology books, we may parse out His character to make sense of Him, but He doesn’t exist in parts. When we say **LORD**, we’re speaking of the whole of the divine Person. When we say **God**, we’re speaking of the One who loves incredibly and shows wrath eternally. His attributes aren’t competing thermometers, rising and falling according to the theologian’s preferred temperature. God’s name represents His whole identity.¹⁶ There is a weightiness, then, when we take up the name of God in our speech, or bear His name through a life granted by grace through faith.

And since the Scriptures teach us that God is “immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, every way infinite, most holy...[and] most just and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin,”¹⁷ then we can certainly understand this command of prohibition being followed by the threat of punishment. Now, as God speaks aloud for all to hear at the base of Sinai, He doesn’t specify at this point the nature of the punishment for breaking this command. Whatever it will be, the divine promise behind the phrase **hold him guiltless** is that whoever bears God’s name wrongly won’t get away with it.¹⁸

In later covenant legislation, however, we do see God administering specific punishment for breaking this command in a very sobering way. Leviticus 24:16 reads, “*Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death...The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.*” This was the civil penalty given by God for those living under the covenant He established with Israel. Though there will be a reply of relief by the

¹⁴ G. A. Gaballa, *The Memphite Tomb-Chapel of Mose* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1977). I assume the Kushites were offended by this.

¹⁵ <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2975092/view>

¹⁶ Ryken, 578.

¹⁷ Second London Baptist Confession of 1689, <https://www.the1689confession.com/>

¹⁸ Stuart, 457.

new covenant to come later, at the very least we would be irresponsible to misjudge the seriousness established in taking God's name up in a vain manner.¹⁹ God's word holds true to the end—He will not hold *guiltless* those who misuse and misrepresent the Name that is above all names.

IV. The Honoring of God's Name

Perhaps you see and feel your own guilt in the face of such a demand. I certainly have this week. And the question that arises in the one seeing these commandments accurately, a question begging for an answer as we consider each of these commands each week is, "Where do I go with this weight of guilt?" And the follow-up question when that's established, to echo voices from the past, "How then shall I live?" How can I honor the name of the LORD who made me, cares for me, and has done all to redeem law-breakers like me from that law's curse?

To answer the first question, we dare not begin with ourselves. Friend, we must begin with Someone else who honored God's name without fail. In John 5 we read that Jesus the Christ came in God's name. The fickle crowd was sometimes right, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" Without a minuscule moral misstep, Jesus glorified God's name with His whole life. And in the end, He gave life and limb in death as an expression of the pinnacle of His obedience. While teaching His disciples to hallow God's name, which means to set it apart as holy, His words and action revealed that He practiced what He preached. He did all the law, all the time, so that all whom He would redeem might have His perfect record placed into their account! Why would we ever seek to establish our own righteous record before God? Here's our great boast, brothers and sisters, "*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*"²⁰ This place of rest and relief, of grace and pardon is where these commandments keep sending us. Samuel Bolton said it best four hundred years ago, "The Law sends us to the Gospel, that we may be justified..."

But to answer the second question posed above, Bolton spurs us forward, "...and the Gospel sends us back to the Law to inquire what is our duty [as those] justified."²¹ In what way can we obey this command? As we gaze into the scriptures, the line from 17th-century poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning is apropos, "Let me count the ways." I'll mention two central ways here.

First, we can't be indifferent to our everyday vernacular. How do we speak in such a way as to not "lower the sublime dignity and high holiness of God's Name"?²² We cultivate a regular commitment to steeping our minds in the words that are continually exalting His name—the words of Holy Scripture. I recall instructing my son over the years, Psalm 119:9, "*How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Your Word.*" A hearty diet of the Word will inform the heart which will then pilot the mouth.²³

Second, we have to continually shift our pattern of thinking by considering all our communications and actions reflect Christ. He is the most important thing about us. One of the fullest and most positive applications of this command is found in what Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, "*And*

¹⁹ The righteous Judge of all the earth has taken lives over the breaking of this command. Hananiah in Jer. 28:15-18; Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-10

²⁰ Romans 10:4

²¹ Alistair Begg, *Pathway to Freedom*, 29.

²² A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, 162.

²³ To move from the kitchen to the doctor's office, Jeff Robinson says that our tongue "serves as an X-ray organ that reveals what's going on in our hearts" (*Taming the Tongue*, 27).

whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."²⁴ His name is associated with everything we do; His reputation in this world is tied to our own.²⁵

Conclusion

It's safe ground to say that we've all experienced taking the name of the LORD God in vain. Like the other nine, it reveals our flaws. They're all a kind of spiritual mirror. And none are in the habit of requesting that a mirror fix what it reflects. So, it's a false and deadly move to expect these commands to fix us, to remove our sin. For that, we fly in trust to the Law-fulfilling Lord Jesus, a sufficient sacrifice for law-breakers, One who came up under a justice meted out against my crimes. Only under such mercies will our lives be freed to take up the name of Jesus our LORD with nobility, dignity, and with a depth of honesty.

Indeed, a shift has taken place under the new covenant enacted by Christ's death and resurrection. It's His name, the name of our LORD Jesus, which fills our all in all. By believing we have life in His name.²⁶ We serve one another out of love for His name.²⁷ We worship fruitfully as we acknowledge the glory of His name.²⁸ We called upon His name and were saved.²⁹ Baptism was a naming-rite ceremony, as Jesus' followers have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³⁰ At times we are to suffer dishonor for the sake of His name, who suffered dishonor for us.³¹ At this name, every knee will one Day bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is LORD.³²

God has told us His name. His name matters. And His name matters most of all.
Are you living to know it, and to make it known?

If you are, on this subject of God's name, be encouraged by the arc of scripture! Here, in Exodus 20, the people of God are rightly forbidden to dishonor God's name. From this command onward Scripture unfolds both the improper and proper usage of God's name. But in the very end, His people, led out of the worst bondage by a superior Mediator into the new heavens and new earth, will experience this double blessing: Revelation 22:4, "*They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*" There, clothed with immortality, we will eternally bear the name of our LORD precisely as our Savior has done for all eternity—with the deepest joy and in highest regard. Yes! Yet, until then, we keep spurring one another on, "*Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His NAME together!*"

²⁴ Colossians 3:17

²⁵ Ryken, 584.

²⁶ John 20:31

²⁷ Hebrews 6:10

²⁸ Hebrews 13:15

²⁹ Acts 2:21

³⁰ Matthew 28:19

³¹ Acts 5:41

³² Philippians 2:10