

Taking the Name of the LORD in Vain

"What's in a name?" That's the question Juliet asked about Romeo in the famous Shakespeare play. Romeo and Juliet's two families were at odds with one another. It was the unthinkable thing that they should fall in love together. But Juliet said that the family name was unimportant. Romeo was Romeo regardless of what he was called. The name was a discardable placeholder, just standing in place for the person who Romeo actually was; he was something more than a name or title could ever express. And so she uttered that famous line, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Well, that's good poetry, and maybe good love advice, but if we apply the logic to God, it's not the best theology.

You see, the Bible repeatedly tells us that the *name* of God is very important. Now, yes, God is not confined in a name. At the end of the day, God is more than just a name. The Bible recognizes that. But, the Bible so often refers to the name of God as standing in the place of God. It essentially represents God in the language of Scripture. But, you see, that's why his name becomes so important. We humans can't see God with our eyes. But we can be told about him. And so his name is tied up with his glory. Isaiah 26:8, "O LORD, we wait for you, your name and renown are the desire of our soul."

Scripture actually gives us many names and titles of God. To name just a few, you have: El-Shaddai, meaning "God Almighty". Adonai, meaning "Lord." El Elyon, meaning "God Most High." And then of course you have the revealed personal name of God, the name revealed at the burning Bush, Yahweh, roughly meaning "I AM WHO I AM." We could spend a whole sermon just going through all the names and titles given for God in Scripture. And yet despite these many different ways to address the one true God, we still see a strong emphasis in Scripture on the name (singular) of God. God is so very clear on this. His name is to be revered and hallowed. And it's right here in the third commandment that we find this engraved permanently in God's law.

And so today we'll be reflecting on this commandment which guards the proper use of God's name. You know with so much in Scripture about the name of God, this is an important commandment for us to understand. This commandment has a larger scope than I think we often recognize. And so let's turn to think about God's name now in this third commandment.

The third commandment is just a few words, but I think it can seem a bit nebulous to us, though. Don't take the name of God in vain. But it's that word "vain" that can seem a little fuzzy at times. That's probably not a word you use that often. If you look up the word "vain" in an English dictionary one of the definitions is "worthless," as in something done without real significance. And in the Hebrew, that's actually the primary meaning of this word. "Worthless." God doesn't want his name used in worthless ways.

We can use God's name worthlessly in a number of ways. If we use his name in some false or incorrect way; that would be to use his name in vain. That would be a worthless use of his name, because it wouldn't be a correct use. Another way is if we use his name in a way that he wouldn't want us to use it, like for some evil purpose. That would also be a vain or worthless use of his name. Or if we use his name in some fleeting or casual way, just throwing around his name without any real care or thought; then that too is a vain or worthless use of his name. It doesn't properly hallow the great name of God. We should be ascribing worth and value to God's name, not use it worthlessly by treating it without a proper holiness.

Now in the third commandment it seems that the most specific thing being forbidden here has to do with oaths. It was a common practice for God's people under certain

Well, I think it has to do with the nature of the commandment. Often when we break this commandment it is something that others cannot see. Take an oath for example. If you solemnly swear in the name of the Lord that something is true, something that only God could verify, then no man is going to be able to hold you accountable if you were lying. That's not so much the case with so many of the other commandments. You can get caught stealing. You can get caught in the act of adultery. Disregarding the Sabbath is often very visible to others. Men can hold you accountable in those commandments when you are found out. The church leaders can shepherd you when they see you falling into those visible sins. But when you take the name of the LORD and use it say in an oath to testify to the truth of something; though others may not know if you are lying, God will know. God will hold you guilty, even if others never know. That same is true with any vain use of God's name. If you treat God's name in some flippant or insincere way, others might not know. You might talk about God all the time as if you are so holy, but in your heart know that you are just putting on a show; that you could care less about the things you are saying. Others may not know. But God knows. God sees the heart. And so I think that's why with this commandment specifically points out that your guilt will be known by God. You might get away with your sin before others, but you won't get away with it before God. Now of course, I'm not yet even talking about the forgiveness that we have available in Christ. We thank God for that. But I'm just strictly speaking for the moment about God's righteous standards and how he forbids using his name in vain.

Well, we've talked a lot about what God forbids in terms of using his name. But how should we then rightly use God's name? That's a big question. There are so many passages throughout the Bible that talk about how we should revere and employ the name of God; more than we can cover today. But we don't need to go that far. We don't even need to leave the book of Deuteronomy to get a good taste of several ways that we can rightly use God's name. So I have six quick things here from Deuteronomy that tell us how to rightly handle the name of God. This is not an exhaustive list; but a good sample of right ways to use God's name.

The first one is rather obvious. Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20 says that we should swear by God's name. In other words, our solemn oaths are right to be taken up in God's name. But of course we have to remember Jesus' warning, how at that time people were breaking this commandment with false oaths or frivolous ones. But we know there are appropriate times to take an oath in the name of God. Just think of courtroom testimony. You swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. Well the book of Deuteronomy actually commands us that there are appropriate times to do this.

A second right use of God's name is found in Deuteronomy 10:18 and 18:5. It says that the priests should bless the people in God's name. In the new covenant, we are all essentially priests, and so it's right to bless one another in the new covenant. And of course, pastors, acting as God's representatives give the benediction in the worship service, which is the blessing on God's people, in the name of God.

A third right use of God's name is found in Deuteronomy 18:19. It talks about how God would send another prophet after Moses, and that prophet would speak words in God's name. That meant that the prophets words *must* be followed, because they came with God's name on them. To not follow words which were rightly spoken in God's name, would of course be breaking the third commandment. We'd be treating his name in vain to disregard words given in his name. Of course, Deuteronomy 18 goes on to warn against false prophets who speak falsely in God's name. They are not to be followed, and they themselves of course are breaking the third commandment in their false prophecy. This applies to us every time we read God's Word. The Word is prophecy given in God's name. We must not take it lightly. If we do, we take God's name in vain. If we rightly honor God's revealed word, then we are rightly honoring his name by which the words were spoken.

A fourth right use of God's name is that we should praise God's name. Deuteronomy 32:3 records Moses in the Song of Moses saying that he proclaims the name of the Lord

And so saints of God, we've been taught about this law today. And we've been reminded about the gospel. As Christians, we should in gratitude really strive to live out this third commandment by God's grace. And so, I'd like to spend the last few minutes today thinking about a few practical applications of this command. Some areas where we might find ourselves struggling in. In other words, let's try to bring this commandment close to home.

Let's think about our own oaths and vows. You probably don't find yourselves very commonly swearing something in the name of God. I think that's wise, and fitting with Jesus' own warnings. But there are certain solemn promises we make in God's name from time to time. Marriage vows. Court testimony. Church membership vows. Church leaders have ordination vows. We must recognize that these are serious things. That means that we must not make rash vows like King Saul did. But we must also recognize that we swear to our own hurt as well. And so we should make what sacrifices are necessary to keep these solemn vows to the LORD.

Let's think about our prayer life. Whose name do we pray in? That's right, Jesus' name. I think we need to be careful not to use God's name in vain in our prayers. If we pray for worthless things, we are using his name in vain. Like if we pray for some sinful thing, something outside of his revealed will. We need to really think through what we are praying for. Is it what God would have us to be praying for? Or, if we pray in his name, but don't really mean what we pray, then we use his name in vain. Like if we pray, "Lord use me to share the gospel to my neighbor," without any real intention to ever go there with your neighbor; then that's praying in the Lord's name in vain. We really need to search our hearts and attitudes when we pray. Do we rattle off the Lord's Prayer by memory, not really thinking through what we are praying? Isn't that also using the Lord's name in vain? A prayer offered in his name, but without any real thought? Or if you are in church, praying together, and you are day dreaming the whole time, and then at the end say, "in the name of Jesus, amen?"

Along the same lines, let's think about our worship together. If you are day dreaming during a hymn, or your mind is wandering during a corporate prayer, or you are sleeping during the sermon, then are you treating his name in vain. The hymns are praising his name. The prayer is offered in his name. The Word that's being proclaimed is the Holy Scriptures that have been given in his name! We've assembled together to worship in his name. All of the ways that we don't come prepared to worship, the ways we treat this service lightly, they all are taking his great name in vain. Instead, let's prepare all week for worship. When we hear the prelude start, let's find a seat and prepare our hearts even then. And during the service, let's be mentally engaged and attentive. Let's worship with our whole selves; heart, mind, soul, and strength.

What I'm really calling us to do is reflect on all the things we do explicitly in the name of Jesus. We have been united to Christ! We've been baptized into his name. We are called "Christians;" i.e. the name "Christ" is identifying us. We've been called by his name. His name is upon us. Everything that we do in his name is an opportunity to rightly revere and employ his name, but it's also an opportunity to treat it in vain. Let's strive to rightly glorify his name. Let's aim to use this great name in all the blessed ways we've been called. Let not his name be used lightly, but also don't miss the advantages of using his name. His name is not something to be locked in a safety deposit box never to utter or use. No, it's been given to us as a great blessing. God and his great name has been revealed to us, and he has placed his name upon us. Praise the LORD!

And as we rejoice in this great name, may we look forward to the day of Christ's return. Remember this prophecy from Isaiah, which also contains an oath from God in his own name. Isaiah 45:23, "By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'" That's a promised that everyone will bow to God one day,