

### Commandments III: The Power of a Name

08/28/2022

Exodus 20:7

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

As an author, one of my favorite parts of writing a story is deciding on names for my characters. On a certain level, every character, however minor a role they may play, however righteous or evil they might be, is like a child to me, and I like to believe that I experience the same joy in naming my characters as expectant parents do in naming their “bun in the oven.” At one point, I even went through and looked up what my first and middle names mean, and apparently, my names mean that I am “the defender of a grassy meadow.” I’d like to think that there would be sheep in that meadow, making me a shepherd, therein making my names appropriate to my being a pastor, but maybe I’m just overly-imaginative. Regardless, there’s so much that goes into our names.

Our names give us a sense of identity. They tell people who we are. We see God change people’s names in the Bible so that their name befits their role/purpose in God’s narrative. But what about God’s name? When Moses asks God what Their name is, They say, “Yahweh”, literally “I am.” Jewish tradition, though, forbids them from saying God’s name, and therefore, they say “Adonai” or “My Lord” in its place. Many even argue that Yahweh isn’t even God’s actual name, that we as mere mortals are not meant to know such things. So, if the names we have may not be God’s actual name and we aren’t allowed to know God’s real name, how then can we take it in vain?

The first thing we need to understand about this commandment is that it’s not actually exclusively about God’s name in and of itself. Just like a name identifies a person, so too do that person’s actions, words, and thoughts identify them. Therefore, “God’s name” is inclusive of Scripture, the Law, the sacraments, prayer, and any other way that God is made known, whether to us or through us. This commandment is about abusing and profaning all means by which God is made known to us. So, with that key point in mind, this commandment unravels as to all the ways one can do this without knowing if God’s name is Bob, Hank, or something else.

Understandably, when we hear this command, we think of verbally taking God’s name in vain. We think of when we’ve been driving along the freeway and someone cuts us off without even having the decency of using a turn signal. In that moment, we can’t help but say something like, “Oh! My! God! Where did you learn to drive?” We don’t mean to do it or mean any ill by it, but our slip of the tongue just kind of happens. Nevertheless, I’m sure we can all agree that such usage of God’s or Jesus’ names doesn’t honor or glorify their names. It doesn’t afford them the majesty and praise their names are to be afforded. However, as it turns out, there are worse ways of taking God’s name in vain.

For example, a second, debatably worse, way that God’s name is taken in vain is by weaponizing it or by weaponizing Scripture. Consider how God and Scripture both have been weaponized just within the last hundred years alone. The Jim Crow movement in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century used Scripture to justify their discriminatory views and their heinous actions. Across the pond, you had the Third Reich in Germany in the ‘20s, ‘30s, and ‘40s that used it to support antisemitism, mass incarceration, and later, mass genocide. Even in the modern day, cults like the Westboro Baptist Church and hate groups like the KKK use God’s name and Scripture to justify their tirades against one group or another. At the same time, politicians cherry pick Bible verses to justify their beliefs, campaigns, and votes without regard for what

that particular verse is actually talking about. Individuals claim that, because they're Christian and the Bible says they're forgiven through Jesus', they are entitled to discriminate against/hate one group or another. They believe that they are better than and exulted above other groups, and therefore are relieved of needing any sort of conscience. So long as they are Christian, they can think, say, and do whatever they want, right or wrong, because they'll be forgiven and it won't matter. Every one of them, past and present, takes God's name in vain by washing their hands of any responsibility for their actions. However, it doesn't end there.

A third way we take God's name in vain is wishing ill of another person by praying God will punish them on our behalf. Maybe it was a sibling when you were young that you wished God would give chicken pox for a second time, or a bully at school you wished would get expelled and/or arrested, or maybe it was an intolerable coworker or boss that you wished would just get fired. Maybe we even go so far as to wish eternal condemnation, torment the like of which we have not the mental capacity to fathom, upon a person or group for whatever reason. Regardless of who the target is and what ill will we wish upon them, such wishes and thoughts take God's name in vain.

The last way I'll mention is in regards to swearing and oaths. We all know the oath a witness has to take when appearing in court: "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" They may even have to put their hand on a Bible while being sworn in. If someone says, "Yes," and then lies on the stand (i.e. commits perjury), they have taken the Lord's name in vain, because lies and dishonesty do not afford God's name the honor and praise it is to be afforded. At the same time, swearing and making oaths that are themselves unlawful, even if one doesn't break those oaths, takes God's name in vain, because unlawfulness does not afford God's name the honor, respect, and praise it is to be afforded.

Regardless of how it's done, the same sin is committed. Any word, deed, or thought that does not afford God the glory They are to be shown is taking Their name in vain. Any abuse of God's words/deeds, the Scriptures, the sacraments, or any other way that God makes Themselves known takes Their name in vain. This is because, no matter how it's done, taking God's name in vain in every case does the same thing as making an image of God: it forces God into this nice little box whereby we control and define who and what God is rather than reveling in the mystery that is God. In all truth, it does exactly what the religious elite in the gospel reading for today did.

In the gospel passage, Jesus is on a tirade against the religious elite. He accuses them of fasting more often than is necessary and making a show of their misery to garner attention from the commoners. In the same way, they give more than is necessary in tithes to garner that said praise and attention. Thirdly, they pray loudly and publicly so that everyone will notice them. In short, they've taken all these zealous practices and weaponized them. They are doing these things not because they are in fact zealous but because it gives them the power and authority for which they so hunger. They have turned the Scriptures, the practices laid out in the Law, and even God into tools to gain them greater power and authority over the people, power they abuse to judge and dehumanize their neighbors. In so doing these things, they have taken God's name in vain in some of the worst ways possible. They truly are hypocrites, for if they truly were the religious elite, they wouldn't break such a basic commandment.

In the end, this is what it is to take God's name in vain. It's not just misusing God's name and attaching expletives to it. It's misusing Scripture for our own benefit. It's wishing divine intervention against those who have done us wrong. It's making God a weapon and a tool rather than a power beyond imagining, one worthy of our awe and praise. It's taking a name that

means humility, redemption, forgiveness, and love for countless souls and selfishly turning it on its head to mean hatred, malice, and damnation for those deemed “other.” Very truly, I tell you, through our words, thoughts, deeds, and very beings, we either glorify God’s name or we take it in vain. Which are you doing?