

In the Name of God

Exodus 20:1-7
August 28, 2016

Introduction

Here's a riddle for you: What is something that belongs only to you, yet is used more by others? The answer, of course, is your name.

Today we are going to be thinking about names. That sounds pretty straightforward, right? A name is a very familiar concept to us. Everybody has a name. Even God has a name. In the Old Testament, we read that God introduces himself to his people by the name "Yahweh." In most of our English Bibles, this is translated as "LORD", with all capital letters. This is also where the name for God, "*Jehovah*" came from. The Hebrew letters for God's name, YHWH, at one point were mistakenly transliterated as *Jehovah*. The correct pronunciation is *Yahweh*.

When you stop and think about it, this is really amazing.. The God who created the entire universe revealed himself to us and introduced himself to us by name. The greatest Being in existence wants to know us on a first name basis.

So it makes sense that the way we use God's name is very important. The third commandment reads "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

Most of us are probably somewhat familiar with the Ten Commandments. How many of you could recite them from memory? But I think that this is one that we tend not to spend much time on. Somehow how it doesn't seem quite as important as the others. And it seems simple to follow. If we aren't in the habit of using God's name like a swear word, we tend to think that we've got this one pretty well figured out.

The thing is, the command not to misuse God's name is more significant than we tend to realize. We're going to take a deeper look at it this morning.

Understanding the Ten Commandments and the Law

First, a quick word about these laws we call the 10 commandments. Sometimes we can be uncomfortable talking about commandments. Being too wrapped up in following commandments is a path to legalism, right? But what we need to realize here is that the purpose of the law is not--and never was--to try to work our way into salvation. The law was given to people who had already received God's grace. When the people of Israel received the law, they had already been saved out of Egypt. They had already received their identity from God as his special chosen people. The law was the set of instructions they needed for living out this identity. So we should care about the commandments, not because of legalism or thinking that we need to follow a set of rules to be saved, but so that we can better understand how God wants us as his saved people to live.

Here's another issue when we read the 10 commandments. We think that these are more important than the other moral instructions in the Bible. We treat them like they are "The Big Ten". But that isn't the role that the 10 commandments play in the law. They are actually a summary of the rest of the Law.

The Old Testament Law includes over 600 different instructions. These commands fall into two categories: those which are about the vertical relationship between humans and God, and the horizontal relationships between people. The first four of the Ten Commandments emphasize a proper love and worship of God, and final six emphasize right human relationships. So we can sum up the entire law the way Jesus did, by quoting these two summary statements: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and strength", and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:34-37).

So the commandment not to misuse God's name falls into the category of our relationship to God, alongside the first two commandments that condemn idolatry. It's important for us to see the context here. First, God begins in verse two by telling the people who he is and what he has done for them. He says "I am the LORD your God (Yahweh), who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of Slavery." It wasn't by the people's own power that they came out of Egypt. It wasn't by any of the false Egyptian Gods that they were delivered. It was the LORD, Yahweh. He calls himself "the LORD, *your* God." He identifies himself with his people. "You are *my* people." "I am *your* God." So God's reason for commanding the people not to worship any other gods or idols is partly for the obvious reason that he alone is the one true God, but beyond that because he is *their* God. To worship an idol is more than just a theological error. It is an act of betrayal and rebellion against the God who loves and redeems his people. To worship an idol is a failure to acknowledge who God, Yahweh, is.

So misusing God's holy name falls into the same category as idolatry. Both idolatry and misusing God's name represent a failure to honor and worship God for who he is. It's a refusal to acknowledge God as holy.

Understanding the Name of God

To fully understand the reason for this commandment not to misuse God's name, we need to see the significance of names in Biblical times, and especially the significance of God's name. We tend to think of a name just as a label that designates a person or a thing. But in Hebrew, a name carries more of a weight than that. A person's name is deeply connected to the person himself. This especially comes out when the Old Testament talks about God's name. For example, think about the opening of Psalm 8: "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" This doesn't mean that God's name, Yahweh, has an especially majestic ring to it. It means that God himself is majestic! We see this figure of speech all over the Old Testament: God's name is great. God's name is trustworthy. God's name is holy. When the Old Testament refers to the name of God, it is talking about God himself.

There's another important connotation here about the phrase "the name of God." It's connected to God's reputation; what he is known for, or famed for. When someone is famous, their name is widely known. For example, we would say that *Michael Phelps* is a household name because of the fame he has gained as an Olympic athlete. If we look back to Psalm 8:1, we see that God's name is not just majestic, but is majestic *in all the earth*. It's a way of saying that God's majesty is famous throughout the world.

This isn't just semantics. This is the heart of God in Scripture. His intention from the beginning of creation was that the human race would know him by name. This is why he introduced himself by name to the people of Israel. He wanted them to know him for who he was. He wanted them to help extend his reputation throughout the world. And this is the same call that God has given all of us. God wants to know us by name, and wants us to tell the world who he is. So here we begin to see just why it is so important how we treat God's name.

The Practice of Swearing or Oath-Taking

There's another piece of the puzzle to understanding what this commandment is getting at, and that is the practice of oath-taking or swearing. The commandment was especially aimed at forbidding swearing falsely by God's name. We see this command clearly repeated in Leviticus 19:12, "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD."

This practice of swearing an oath is something that is probably more foreign to us in our culture, except maybe for formal settings like a marriage ceremony or in a courtroom. In ancient Hebrew culture as well as many other cultures, the practice of swearing has been a way of giving weight to one's words by connecting them to an even greater reality. For example, if a person makes a promise and seals it with an oath such as "I swear by my right hand", it's like saying "I would sooner lose my right hand than fail to deliver on my promise." Or if someone says "I swear by the sun and the moon", it's like saying my word on this is just as reliable as the next sunrise. This kind of oath-taking would create a binding agreement, and therefore a very powerful sense of accountability. People would be held liable for their words and what they invoked in their oaths.

This is why swearing an oath using God's name was such serious business. People might be tempted to swear by God's name because that would be the strongest, most binding oath one could make. A person could give the ultimate weight to his promise by attaching his words to God himself. But see the great danger here. If someone made a promise and swore by God's name, and what they promised didn't come true, they would be a liar. But not just a liar about the promise they made. They would be lying about God. When a person would swear by God, it was like saying "If my word doesn't come true, then God is not God." An ordinary lie is bad enough. It's so much worse to bring God into it so that we are lying about him.

This was a point that Jesus pressed even harder in the Sermon on the Mount. He said:

"Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is God's footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." (Matthew 5:34-37).

Jesus was essentially saying here that we should not attach our words to realities that we cannot control. Because who is in ultimate control? It's God, right? So to swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or even our own head is to put ourselves in the place of God. We are elevating our words and our power to a level that belongs to him alone. So certainly to swear by the name of God is to promise more than we can deliver. It's an attempt to lift our words up to his level. But what really happens is that we drag God and his reputation down to our level.

The bottom line is that this commandment is about the attempt to use God's name, his reputation, for our own purposes. It's an attempt to make God a subject of our words rather than humbling ourselves to obey His. To ride God's coattails for our own benefit. To try to make God a servant of our agenda rather than the other way round.

Earlier we connected this commandment about not misusing God's name to the commandments about idolatry. I think that now we can see the connection even more clearly. Idolatry puts something besides God at the center of our universe. When we misuse God's name, we are putting ourselves and our agendas in that place where only God belongs.

Applications

Maybe all of this seems somewhat theoretical. What does all of this really have to do with us and our daily lives? How might we be guilty of misusing God's name?

One of the most common ways that we apply this commandment is by not using God's name like a swear word. That's certainly a valid application. To use his name as a curse or an expletive seems to clearly dishonor God. So one way to obey this commandment is not to do that. God is a real person, not a swear word. And he's not just any person. He's the holy king of the universe. He deserves all the honor and reverence which we can give him.

But this command also refers to a much broader issue. We don't just misuse God's name when we use it like a swear word. We misuse God's name whenever we invoke God to justify something that doesn't represent him, or when we do something or say something in his name that he doesn't stand behind.

Think about some of the things that have been done in the name of God throughout history. Before his conversion the Apostle Paul persecuted the church in the name of God. There were times in the middle ages in which the cross was held up to justify the killing of Jews. Even Adolf Hitler tried to do this. He once said, "in defending myself against that Jew, I am doing the Lord's work" In our own time, we continue to see God's name dragged into human wrongdoing. Think of the infamous church that has a reputation for picketing soldier's funerals with signs saying that God hates homosexuals. Perhaps the most radical example would be those members of the Islamic State who believe that their violence and brutality is what their God wants. We look at these examples and we cringe. We think, "How dare these people so seriously misrepresent God!" It angers and saddens us to see God's name being attached to these kinds of evil deeds. Certainly these are all ways in which people have seriously misused the name of God.

Politics

But sometimes the message can strike a little closer to home. One example is in the area of politics. It seems as though political activists and candidates never grow tired of claiming that God is on their side. The interesting thing is that people on both sides of the political spectrum make that claim.

This is nothing new. During the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln really wrestled with this. He noticed how the North and the South both appealed to the same God when they made their arguments. There were people on both sides who thought they were fighting a holy war and that God was behind their cause. Lincoln observed that they could not both be right about having God on their side. At least one side was wrong. On one occasion someone asked him if he was confident that God was on the side of the Union. Lincoln responded "The real question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side."

I think that we still need to listen to that advice. Sometimes we are so quick to assume that God is behind all of our political convictions that instead of honestly seeking his heart on the issues, we just invoke his name to give our argument more clout. We can too quickly presume that we are speaking on God's behalf. People on both sides of the political spectrum frequently make simplistic claims about what God is for or against that go beyond what the Bible actually tells us.

Now, I'm not trying to say that God is neutral on the issues we care about. God does take sides. More specifically, God takes his own side. So the question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on his. Are we adjusting our thinking so that we think like Jesus, or are we adjusting our "Jesus" to match a political profile? Are we really advancing God's name, or are we using God's name to advance our own agenda?

Personal Self-centeredness

This isn't just an issue in politics. This can also be a very personal issue. It can surface especially in our interpersonal conflicts. It can even show up in church.

Let me give a very personal example. It can be easy for those who preach sermons to slip into trying to use God for our own purposes, even unintentionally. Or at least this can be true of me. It's easy to slip into a kind of self-consciousness where I want to preach a great sermon, but it's really more about me and my reputation rather than God's reputation. Even in a sermon that is all about God, it's frighteningly easy for me as a preacher to be thinking about how my sermon will make a good impression; will make *me* look good. In that case, I'm really trying to use God for my own purposes. It's one of the spiritual hazards of the job.

Now, the reason I use this as an example is that I don't think I'm alone. As humans, I think most of us have a natural tendency to make it all about ourselves. Even worship, which is by definition a God-centered activity, can so easily be made all about us and our desires.

Conflicts

Look at how this can also come out in conflicts—interpersonal conflicts, and conflicts in the church body. These conflicts generally start with a desire or a cause that someone has. Just for sake of example, let's look at the classic scenario: the color of the carpet. One person wants blue, another person wants red. But it's not enough to win the argument to simply say "I like red carpet!" If we can find a way of suggesting that God likes red carpet, then our point of view has some real clout. The problem is that unless God really does prefer red carpet, we are using his name for our own agenda.

Maybe that's kind of a silly example, but I think you can see how this process works. Someone starts out with a desire or a cause. Chances are, it's a good cause. Only rarely do church conflicts break out over bad causes. But the cause or the desire becomes a demand. It becomes an idol. We will do anything to get it. Even misuse God's name by draping our cause in holy-sounding language.

Of course, there are times when we do need to take a stand for what we know pleases God. For example, we know that God values all human life. We know that the only way to God is through Jesus. So there are points on which we won't compromise. My point is that as we take our stands, we need to carefully ask ourselves questions: are we speaking about God in ways that are reverent? In ways that are Biblical? In ways that are carefully thought-through? Have we adjusted our worldview so that it matches God's rather than adjusting our view of God to fit our agenda?

Conclusion

We've looked at a few different ways in which we can misuse God's name. We can use it like a swear word. We can treat God as merely an ally whose name we can invoke in our political activities or personal conflicts. But the issue ultimately boils down to this: misusing God's name, in the broader sense, is ultimately about a failure to acknowledge him as holy. It is a lack of reverence.

In Hebrews 12:28-29 we are told to "worship God with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." We make a big mistake whenever we think that we can somehow use God for our own purposes. He will be obeyed, or disobeyed. He will be loved, or hated. He will be received or rejected. He will be our Lord and Savior or he will be our enemy. But he cannot be trivialized. He cannot be reduced into an ally who helps us in our own personal quests or projects, however noble they may be. He cannot be turned into a passive object which we possess and pull out when he is useful to us. God cannot be used.

But he can use us. And by his grace, he does use us. As followers of Jesus, God has given us the honor of bearing his name. God has given us our identity as his holy people. And he wants to use us to show the greatness and majesty of his name throughout the world—to call others to know God by name through Jesus. God has sent us in the power of his name.

So the question I want us all to leave with today is this: how am I—how are we—revealing God's name to others? What are my words and my actions saying to the world about who God is? Is my life telling the truth about God?

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