

The Ten Promises: *Don't Let It Be in Vain* - wk 4

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Oct. 25 2020
(Based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's sermon series *The Manufacturer's Specifications*)

We're continuing our *Ten Promises* series, based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's book of sermons titled *The Manufacturer's Specifications*. Today we're looking at the Third Commandment.

Oh, what a different world this would be if more of us obeyed the third commandment: **"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain..."** (Exod. 20:7).

This sermon on the third commandment could probably be subtitled, *"Something Worse Than Mere Profanity."* As I hope to demonstrate, using God's name to express anger, frustration or surprise is the least offensive way the third commandment is broken. In the third commandment, the Living God is saying, *"I have given you one of the greatest gifts you can ever receive. Do not take it in vain. But if you take up My name, "I AM there with you and for you always."*

The Hebrew word translated "vain" literally means "nothing" or "emptiness." In the third commandment, the Living God is saying to Moses, to old Israel, to new Israel (the Church), to you and to me, *"I have given you something supremely precious...something for which I am very jealous. I have given you something that changes*

your life. Do not let it be for nothing. Do not empty it of its richness and power. Do not take my gift in vain.”

And what is the gift? It is God’s name. The Living and Holy God has a name. A personal name. A first name, if you will. And God has told us what it is. And God has invited us to take it. The word “take” in this commandment means to “carry,” to “raise,” to “take up.” The Living and Holy God has a name, has told us what it is, and has invited us to take it up and use it. Oh what a different world this would be if more of us would take God’s name and use it. I’ll explain three ways we do this, but first here’s the context for the giving of God’s name.

Only a few months before God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, God encountered Moses at the foot of the mountain in a burning bush. The encounter is described in Exodus 3. From within the bush, a flame with fire but not being consumed, the Living God spoke surprising words. God said,

“Moses...I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.... I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. So I have come down to deliver them...” (Exodus 3:4, 6-8).

Those are revolutionary words in any generation. It meant that Israel’s four hundred years of slavery and oppression

had not gone unnoticed. Her prayers had been heard. She had not been alone in her suffering. The God of her ancestors, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebecca, the God of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, is the God who sees everything that happens in our worlds, who hears the cries of agony and despair, who feels the world's pain, and who comes down to intervene on behalf of His people.

So surprising-so wonderfully surprising- is this revelation that Moses asks God, "Who are You?" But he does not ask it directly. He asks the question in a roundabout way. Moses says:

"Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:13).

God responds: **"I AM WHO I AM. ...Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you"" (Exodus 3:14).**

God continues:

"Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'Yahweh, [this is the name buried beneath the words "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, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:15).

According to Australian Old Testament scholar, Francis Andersen, the two greatest moments in history are (1) here when the Living God revealed His name, Yahweh; and (2) when the Living God came down to us in Person bearing the name Yeshua, Jesus, which means “Yahweh Is Salvation,” “Yahweh to the Rescue.”

When God revealed Himself to Moses’ ancestors in the past, God became known by a name, or a title, which in some way conveyed that revelation. The most important name up to this point in Israel’s history was *El-Sheddai*. *El-Sheddai* is made up of two words, “*El*,” the common Semitic term for the Divine, and “*Sheddai*,” which means “Mighty One.” Up to this point in history Israel had experienced the Living One as “Almighty God.”

But at the burning bush, God was revealing something more. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, sees and hears and feels people’s suffering, and chooses to get involved with and intervene for His people. This is a new revelation! Therefore, Moses and the Israelites expect a new name or title. The titles by which God was called up to this point in history could not convey the new revelation. Thus the question, “What is Your name?”

“My name is Yahweh.” I want you to call Me Yahweh.

In the ancient near East, names carried greater significance than they do today. You did not know a person unless you knew his or her name. A name in some

way expressed the person's essential character, or told you something about the person's history (past, present, or future).

Frederick Buechner, a pastor and author, pulls together the ancient near eastern ideas about "name" in his book Wishful Thinking. He begins with his own name, which is commonly mispronounced Beekner.

"B-u-e-c-h-n-e-r. It is my name. It is pronounced Beckner. If somebody mispronounces it in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what is foolish is me. If somebody forgets it, I feel that it is I who am forgotten. There is something about it that embarrasses me in just the same way that there is something about me that embarrasses me. I cannot imagine myself with any other name - Held, say, or Merrill, or Hlavacek. If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell somebody my name, I have given him a hold over me that he did not have before. If he calls it out, I stop, look, and listen whether I want to or not. In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since" (1973, p. 12). And that is perfectly fine with God. God wants to be known. God lets us know and use God's name. Yahweh, Y-a-h-w-e-h.

"This is My name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:15).

"You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain."

God says, “My name is Yahweh.” The gift of the name is an invitation to relationship. Remember that. God is giving us full access to all that the name implies. **“You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain.”** Because God is giving us Himself. Don’t ignore that. God isn’t distant. God is active in our lives. We’re in a relationship with Him.

So the question is: how do we take God’s name in vain? How do we empty it, making it of no value? The question is intensified by what God says after commanding us not to take the name in vain; **“...for Yahweh will not leave unpunished the one who takes His name in vain.”** Since we cannot separate God’s name and God’s person, to take God’s name in vain is to take God in vain! To waste the gift of the name is to waste the gift of God.

There are many ways we break the third commandment. I am going to briefly explore only three.

I. First, I take up God’s name in vain when I treat God’s name as a formula. Many of Israel’s contemporaries believed that simply by uttering the consonants and vowels of the deity’s name, one could get the deity’s attention and exercise control over it. Simply uttering the name conjured up the god’s power and blessing.

The third commandment challenged their prevailing view. Simply knowing and uttering God’s name was no guarantee of God’s response. It is possible to utter God’s

sacred name and have it mean nothing at all. The third commandment teaches that “Yahweh, even when addressed as Yahweh, cannot be controlled or manipulated. God’s name is spoken in vain when we think we can get God to do our bidding just because we spoke it” (Biethenherd, op. cit.).

Even though we modern believers understand this, we still try to use God’s name in this way. You can sense this in the way some people say the name “Jesus.” By adding three extra syllables, we don’t conjure up a blessing or God’s power.

But the chief way we still treat the name as a formula is probably by taking oaths in God’s name. We add to our promise “By God I will do it,” or; “So help me God, that’s the truth.” When we do we’re hoping to guarantee the oath, or to transform a false promise into the truth. Such use of God’s name empties the name, it makes it nothing. Which is why Jesus commands us in His Sermon on the Mount not to bring God into it at all!

“Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’” (Matt. 5:33-37).

Adding the word “God” does not do anything for the oath, and only cheapens God in the process.

But why would we call on God’s name in the first place? Because God’s name does carry weighty authority. God’s

name does make things happen! That's why we don't want to try to empty God's name, not use it in vain.

The prophets prefaced their messages with "Thus says the Lord," "Thus says Yahweh," because of the conviction that the name carries clout in the universe. Somehow, even Creation itself comes to attention at the name of Yahweh- even if only to disobey the word in the next moment. We sing rightly, "The mountains bow down and the seas will roar at the sound of Your name." And demons flee and the dead rise up at the sound of the name.

We see the authority of the name lived out in the experience of the early Church. For example, one day, Peter and John went to the temple to pray. As they climbed the steps, a lame man began begging them for alms. Peter looked at him and said,

"I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene - walk!" (Acts 3:1-9). And the man stooped up and walked!

The name "Yahweh," the name "Yeshua," Jesus, carries clout in the spiritual realm. It carries clout in the whole universe. In His name we disciples can come against the evil and chaos around us. Principalities and powers, rulers and authorities, must submit to the name. So Martin Luther can sing:

*“An though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure:
One little word shall fell him.”*
(A Mighty Fortress Is Our God)

That one little word is a name: *“Lord Sabaoth His name.”*
Jesus shall fell the prince of darkness.

We take the name in vain when we treat it as a formula to get God to do something. We take up the name in honor-in fullness- when we trust its inherent authority.

II. Second, I take the name of God in vain when I live in a way that does not square with the name. Time after time, the prophets charged Israel of old with blaspheming God’s name by the way they were living (Isaiah 52:5). We can empty the name, make it nothing in the world, by the way we, who know the name, live. Friedrich Neitzche, the German existentialist philosopher, once said, “Show me that you are redeemed and then I will believe in your redeemer.” Mahatma Gandhi said to E. Stanley Jones, a missionary in India in the first half of last century, “I live what I see in your Christ; it is you Christians that cause me trouble.”

But we take up the name of God in honor and fullness, when we do live a life consistent with Yahweh's character.

As I said last Sunday, we become like our gods. We become like that which we truly worship.

So Jesus teaches us to pray: **“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name, ...on earth as it is in heaven.”** It is a request that God do something about His name. *O Living God, please make Your name real on earth as it is in heaven, make Your name real in my life as it is in heaven. Please honor Yourself by the way You enable me to live.*

We bring honor to the name when we speak truth, because Yahweh is a God of truth. We bring honor to the name when we seek justice, for Yahweh is just and loves justice. We bring honor to the name when we do mercy, for Yahweh is merciful, oh so merciful! We bring honor to the name when we are patient with sinners in the process of being redeemed, for Yahweh is slow to lose patience. We bring honor to the name when we give ourselves to the poor, to the marginalized, to the needy, for Yahweh is the God of the marginalized.

We bring honor to the name when we step out and share our faith with the world, for Yahweh seeks to have His name named among all of the nations. We bring honor to the name when we try to make peace, when we work at reconciliation, for Yahweh is the God of peace, the great Reconciler. We bring honor to the name when we “keep

hope alive,” for Yahweh holds the world in His hands. Jesus will have His way. And we bring honor to the name when we live sacrificially for the Kingdom’s sake, for Yahweh’s great moment of glory was on the cross, when He laid down His life for the world.

III. Third, I take up God’s name in vain when I throw it around carelessly, thoughtlessly, and flippantly. We do this when we use any of God’s names to express anger, frustration or surprise. You know what I mean.

In the third commandment, God tells us that God takes the name Yahweh seriously. That is putting it mildly! **“For Yahweh will not leave the one unpunished who takes His name in vain”** (Exodus 20:7).

Why? Because the consonants and vowels are so sacred? No, because disregard for the name reveals disregard for Yahweh: Jesus says that the words that come from our lips, however unintentional, reveal the attitude of our hearts (see (Luke 6:45). If we throw the name around carelessly, it reveals the carelessness of our hearts.

But we take up God’s name with honor and in fullness, when we “call upon the name.” The opposite of carelessness and flippancy is prayer and praise.

Take some time today or tomorrow and read the Psalms watching for the way the psalmists “call upon the name.”

Remember that behind the English title, “The LORD” in all capitals, is the Hebrew name Yahweh. Read the Psalm out loud using God’s personal name:

Psalm 3:7 **“Arise, O Yahweh, save me, O my God!”**

Psalm 5:1 **“Give ear to my words, O Yahweh, consider my groaning.”**

Psalm 6:1, 2, 8 **“O Yahweh, do not rebuke me in Your anger...”**

“Heal me, O Yahweh, for my bones are dismayed.”

“...Yahweh has heard the voice of my weeping.”

Psalm 18:1-3, 6a

“I love You, O Yahweh, my strength.

Yahweh is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,

My God, my rock in whom I take refuge....

“...I call upon Yahweh, who is worthy to be praised,

And I am saved from my enemies.

“...In my distress I called upon Yahweh.”

On it goes, calling on The Name.

Just before Moses died he received, for the people of Israel, all of the blessings of their redemption. One of the blessings was this: **“What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is Yahweh our God whenever we call upon Him”** (Deut. 4:7).

Of course Yahweh is near; that is what the name means: *“I am there with you and for you, all that I am I am with you and for you.”* Yahweh always acts in a way that hallows this name; God never acts in ways that go against this name. *“I AM there with you and for you.”*

Calling on the name of Yahweh turns out to be the highest form of honor we can give God, higher than praise.

“I Am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of slavery. I am Yeshua your Savior who claims you for My own. I give you My Name. Do not let it be in vain.”

Would you pray with me?

Lord God, Almighty and everlasting Father, You have brought us in safety to this new day: Preserve us with Your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all we do direct us toward the fulfilling of Your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord. We know You will be faithful to your name. In Jesus Name, Amen.