

Do not misuse God's name

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 29th January 2006

“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Exodus 20.7)

Introduction

This is the third commandment of the Ten Commandments. It flows from the first two: if we are to put God first in our lives, and not worship any idols, then we must respect and honour God's name, in our everyday speech, our prayers and in our lives. Whenever we use God's name, or speak to God or about him, we should do so with the utmost respect and reverence. We should also remember that, in Bible terms, the “name” of someone is their reputation and honour. If we act in a way which dishonours God, we bring his name into disrepute. We misuse his name. In all we do and say we must act in such a way as enhances God's honour, rather than undermines it.

As we think about this commandment, I want us to think together about seven areas of our lives that this commandment addresses. Then I want us to learn from the warning that God gives to those who break this commandment, and then to see what lessons we can learn from it for ourselves today.

1. Seven areas of our lives that this commandment addresses

First of all, then, let us think together about seven areas of our lives that this commandment addresses:

1) Misusing God's name in our everyday speech

The first and most obvious general area that is addressed by this commandment

is the way in which we speak about God in our everyday speech. If you use God's name, Jehovah, or the name of Jesus, or the word "God" in a careless, irreverent or meaningless way, then you are misusing the God's name, and breaking this commandment.

One way in which people commonly do this is when they call on God's name irreverently without meaning it. Something goes wrong and they blurt out "Oh my God!" without really thinking what they are doing. It is not wrong to call on God's name. We are encouraged to do so in Scripture. But we must make sure that when we do call on the name of the Lord it is a genuine cry for help, and that we are not just blurting out God's name without thinking, perhaps as an expression of surprise more than anything else.

Also forbidden by this commandment is saying that something is for God's sake in an empty or careless way. Again, it is not always wrong to give a command "in God's name." But we must be very careful to do so only when we are commanding something which God himself has clearly commanded in his Word. If we presume to say something in God's name that he has not commanded, it is the height of folly and arrogance (Deuteronomy 18.20). If you say to someone to do something "In God's name" or "For God's sake" or "For Goodness' sake," make sure that you really can honestly say that it is in his name or for his sake that you speak. Otherwise you are misusing God's name.

2) Careless or false oaths

Closely allied with this is making a careless oath. An oath is actually a special sort of prayer, that God would witness what you have said, and that he would judge you if you have said something that is untrue. This commandment is not forbidding all oaths. In Deuteronomy 6 verse 13 God says "Fear the LORD your God only and take your oaths in his name." Oaths are permissible where necessary to establish the truth, for example in a court of law. But we should not swear unless it is strictly necessary for a matter of great importance, to verify our testimony. Yet so many say, hardly thinking about what they are saying, things like "I swear to God". Did you know that if you say "Cor blimey" you are swearing an oath? You are saying "May God blind me." Also the word "damn" is a curse. You are calling on God to condemn you or others.

Many swear oaths to back up a promise, perhaps because they are such habitual liars that they think that unless they swear people will not believe their

word. But Jesus said we should never swear to back up a promise, but we should be those who simply tell the truth and therefore whose word can be trusted. He said, "Do not swear at all....Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'" (Matthew 5.33, 37).

If making a careless oath is forbidden by this commandment, all the more is making a false oath forbidden. Sometimes a witness deliberately commits perjury. He is under oath in court and deliberately tells lies. This is unspeakably wicked. Not only is it treating God's name as of no importance, it also is liable to lead to the perversion of justice, resulting in the guilty being acquitted and the innocent being condemned. If you are called to give testimony under oath you must be very careful to say only what is true. Otherwise you will have to give an account to God for misusing his name, as well as for giving false testimony.

3) Speaking abusively of things or people that God has created

The third general area of life to which this commandment has relevance is the way we speak about things or people that have been made by God. If we are abusive about things or people that have been made by God, then we are indirectly abusing God himself. We are dishonouring his name, and therefore misusing it.

For example, many think nothing of saying the word "Hell" in their every day speech. But who made Hell? God did. It is a place of dreadful suffering and torment for those who are lost, and we should never use the word lightly or as an expression of annoyance. If you use the word in such a way you are dishonouring God who made Hell, and treating it as a trivial thing.

Again, consider the use of the word "bloody". Why do people use this word when they are annoyed? I am not fully sure of the answer, but it may have started as a reference to the blood of Christ. Whether or not this is the case, blood is a very precious thing that is made by God and is essential for the life of a person or and animals, and it should not be trivialised by the misuse of this word.

Then many in our society use crude words which refer to sex in one way or another, words which are so offensive that I would not want to repeat them here. They use them to abuse others or to express annoyance. But sex is something which is beautiful and good in its right context, within marriage. If you use crude and abusive words which refer to sex then you are despising a

precious gift of God, and therefore dishonouring God, as well as being highly offensive to whom you address these words.

Neither should we curse men, who are made in God's image. An insult or a curse expressed to a man is effectively an insult or a curse expressed towards God, because men are made in God's image. James speaks of this. He says in chapter 3 verses 9 to 12 of his letter,

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grape vine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

4) Misusing the gift of prayer

The fourth area which is addressed by this commandment is prayer. I have sometimes heard prayers where the words "Father" and "Jesus" are repeated needlessly and senselessly, as if somehow repeating these words was some sort of mantra which will get your prayer heard more quickly. This sort of praying goes directly against the teaching of Christ, who he told us not to "keep on babbling like pagans" when we pray (Matthew 6.7). It also breaks this commandment, because it is reducing God's name to an empty formula.

We also need to be careful when we pray in Jesus' name. Jesus did indeed invite us to pray in his name (John 13.13 – 14), but we need to be careful that when we pray in Jesus' name we ask for the sort of things that he would ask for, and in the way he would ask. Otherwise we bring dishonour on his name.

This commandment also speaks to our general attitude and behaviour when we gather to pray in church and at home. When we gather, we are gathering in the name of Christ (Matthew 18.20), so if we are irreverent and mess around or chat during prayer times we are dishonouring the name of Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews says, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

5) Complaining against God

A fifth area that this commandment addresses is our speech about God. If we

complain about God, about his character, or about the way in which he has ordered the circumstances of our lives, or the way in which he is governing the world, then we are bringing dishonour on his name, and therefore misusing his name. Remember, moaning, grumbling and complaining are all ultimately complaints against God, because God is the sovereign ruler of all things. Instead of grumbling and complaining, our lives should be characterised by thanksgiving and praise. We should trust that God knows best, even in perplexing and tragic circumstances, and give thanks to him and honour him at all times.

6) Having a wrong attitude to Scripture

A sixth area where this commandment applies is in terms of our attitude to Scripture. If we dishonour God's Word, then we dishonour God's name. We should never have an arrogant and mocking attitude towards the Word of God. "God mocks proud mockers" (Proverbs 3.34). Neither should we make jokes at the expense of the Bible, or be flippant about it. God says, "This is the one I esteem; he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my Word" (Isaiah 66.3).

7) Dishonouring God with our lives

A seventh area that this commandment addresses is that of our general behaviour. If we are known as being believers, yet our lives contradict the profession of faith that we make, we bring dishonour on God's name. This is what God said that the people in the Old Testament times had done. They turned from God to idols, so God exiled them from the promised land. God says in Ezekiel 36.20 that the effect this was that "wherever they went among the nations *they profaned my holy name*, for it was said of them, these are the Lord's people, and they have had to leave this land."

If you are a believer, you bear the name of Christ upon you. If you live in a way which contradicts God's word, you profane the name of God and the name of Christ. Unbelievers will look at your life and say "God cannot be much of a God if his people live like that." By contrast, if we live in a way which is in accordance with the Gospel we will "make the teaching about our God and Saviour attractive" (Titus 2.10).

2. The warning that God gives to those who disobey this commandment

Let us now go on to consider the reason that God gives for obeying this commandment. He says, “for the LORD your God will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”

God is going to judge all mankind. We are going to have to give an account for all our words. Jesus said “But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgement for every careless word they have spoken” (Matthew 12.36). Even for words spoken in private or under your breath there will be a reckoning. “There is nothing concealed which will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs” (Luke 12.2 – 3).

Why does God hold men to account for the way they dishonour his name? Is he like some petty minded individual is desperate for others to bow and scrape to him? Not at all! Jesus said that he is “humble and gentle in heart” (Matthew 11.29), and what Jesus us the Father is. No, God’s justice demands that he uphold the honour of his name. If he did not he would be an unjust and an unholy God. He would be approving idolatry.

What is the appropriate punishment for misusing God’s name? Eternal torment in hell. Sin against the eternal God is so serious that only eternal punishment will satisfy God’s justice.

Lessons to apply to ourselves

What lessons can we take from what we have seen here?

1) We need to be forgiven

The first lesson is that all of us need to be forgiven for our sin. How many times have you used God’s name, or the name of Christ, as a swear word? How many times have you made empty or false oaths? How many times have you used crude and abusive language? How many times have you insulted God by insulting your fellow human beings? How many times have you brought God’s name into disrepute through your sin? Every single instance of dishonouring the name of God makes you worthy of going to Hell.

Isaiah cried when he saw the Lord, “Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6.5). Who of us

can say that we are not the same? We are a people of unclean lips, and we live among a people of unclean lips. And one day we shall be confronted face to face with the Lord whose name we have so insulted and abused. What will happen to you on that day? What excuse will you have? Who will hide you from the wrath of God? What will you do when Christ says to you, "Away from me, you evildoer!" (Matthew 7.23)? How will you be able to resist when the full weight of the wrath of God breaks out upon you? You will not. You will be utterly crushed. And there will be no way of escape. You will be for ever the object of his wrath.

You say, "What can I do then?" Thanks be to God, he has provided an answer. The One who will judge all is also the One who came into the world to save sinners. Jesus said, "Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will never not be forgiven" (Matthew 21.31). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit I understand to mean showing contempt for the Holy Spirit when he brings conviction of sin. That can never be forgiven, because the person who does this is refusing God's provision of salvation. But apart from this one blasphemy, EVERY sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men. How can this be? Because Jesus Christ was punished on the Cross for the sins that sinners have committed against himself and God the Father. This means that everyone who trusts in Christ will be completely forgiven for all their blasphemies and all other sins.

Have you trusted in Christ yet to be your Saviour? Perhaps you have already heard a call for you to believe on Christ as your Saviour. Have you done it yet? If not, why not? What have you to gain by delaying? What would happen to you if you died tonight, or if Christ came again, before you have got round to receiving him as your Saviour? Come to him! Do not delay!

2) We need to be born again

The second thing to learn, which is very closely related, is that we must be born again. We are dealing here primarily with sins of speech. The problem with the tongue is that a corrupt tongue is the overflow of a corrupt heart. You cannot purify the tongue without first purifying the heart. And we are utterly incapable of purifying our own hearts. This is what Jesus said to the Pharisees:

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognised by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings out good out of the good stored in him,

and the evil man brings evil out of the evil stored up in him (Matthew 12.33 – 35).

The tree needs to be changed, root and branch. Only God can do this by the working of the Holy Spirit in us.

Has this happened to you? Have you been born again? If you are not born again you will never begin to overcome the sins we have been thinking about here, and you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.

What should you do if you have not been born again, or if you are unsure? Come to Christ. Ask him to do the miracle in you. Ask him to give you the Holy Spirit.

3) We need to control our tongues

If you have received Christ as your Saviour, and you have been born again, then the main lesson for you to gain from what we have seen here is that you need to take God's means to control the tongue.

The sins that we have been speaking about are sins of the tongue. As James says, our tongue is the most difficult part of our body to control, and can in many ways do the most damage. However, in Christ we *do* have the means to overcome all sin, even sins as troublesome as sins of the tongue. How are we to do this?

The key thing is to cultivate the right patterns of thought. As we have seen, the tongue is the overflow of what is in the heart. If we have, anger, frustration, bitterness and self-pity in our hearts, then this will come out in the way we speak. We might try to repress the feelings, but sooner or later what is inside will come out. So we need to go to God and receive his peace. Jesus said "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14.27).

Coupled with this is developing the habit of thankfulness. We need to remember God's attributes, and all that he has done for us in Christ, and all he has stored up for us in the future. We need to meditate on the fact that he is reigning over all things for our good, and for the good of all those who love him, and give thanks to him in all circumstances. We need to allow God's Word to transform our whole outlook on life, which will in turn transform the way we speak.

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