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Exodus 20:7

Thirty-second Message

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THE THIRD COMMANDMENT: HALLOWED BE THY NAME

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

We return to the foot of Mt. Sinai, where Israel as a nation is allowed to hear the very voice of God, receiving what the Hebrew text calls “The Ten Words.” The atmosphere is charged with a gripping energy and awe as this new community of free men and women await their marching orders. The purpose of these Ten Words is to tenaciously preserve the love, freedom and justice which the Lord so powerfully fought for in Egypt. God hates tyrannical rule and exploitation. He wants Israel to model a radical new way to live, a way that makes us fully human. As Eugene Peterson suggests:

“The Ten Words establish the conditions necessary for a free, loving, and just community of God’s people to develop and flourish. The three adjectives—free, loving, just—are basic to community...None of the conditions is onerous. All are both necessary and non-negotiable. No community worth its salt has ever existed very long in ignorance or defiance of these conditions.”¹

This past summer we examined the first two commandments. The first commandment addresses our affections. God demands nothing less than complete devotion with an undivided heart. The second commandment instructs us how we are to honor God with our hands, that we do not engage in the practice of idol-making. The third addresses our lips, that we protect the sanctity of God’s name.

Now the third commandment:

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.” (Exod 20:7 NASB)

To understand the full significance of the commandment we will examine it in five parts:

1. What’s in a name?
2. The gift of God’s name to Israel
3. The meaning of the commandment
4. The consequences of abusing the name
5. A cure for profaning the name.

I. What’s in a Name?

A. Modern labels

Modern culture places little value on the significance of names. Carl Braaten writes: “As Americans, most of us are born nominalists. We tend to think of names as mere labels... Names do not really matter that much: we can exchange one set of labels for another, and the underlying reality remains the same.”² Most of the time we hardly think about the significance of a name until some sacred boundary, like sports, is violated. Many sports fans have a hard time accepting the fact that the ballparks they grew up in, and were the context for their “field of dreams,” are now being stripped of their identity by corporate Goliaths, who rename them according to the whim of the highest bidder. Outside San Francisco’s new ballpark stands a beautiful bronze statue of one of baseball’s all-time greatest players, Willie Mays. Mays, who played for twenty-two seasons, left

a legacy of hitting, base-stealing and fielding that still lights up the imagination of Little Leaguers decades later. Why didn’t they name our new stadium Mays Field? What’s wrong with naming a baseball park after a real baseball player and infusing it with some of the most magnificent memories of the game? But PacBell won the day.

Then, just when the name started to take root and San Francisco fans began to associate it with that glorious spectacle of soaring home runs, sinister cranes crept in to tear down the name and replace it with a new logo: SBC. What in the world does SBC have to do with baseball? This act of replacing the names of ballparks by corporate sponsors carries more significance than we might think. In our culture, a name is more valuable in the service of present profit than rooting us in the memory of a legacy. Money is our supreme god. Everything else, including sports, is subservient to it.

B. Ancient access to intimacy

But in the ancient world, names served a higher purpose. First, most Hebrew names carried a recognizable meaning that was evident to all. A child’s name could be a reflection of a parent’s faith (Samuel, “God has heard”; Joshua, “Yahweh is salvation”), or the prevailing character of the child (Jacob, “heel-grabber”). When God changed a person’s name, that action did not reflect a sudden plunge in stock prices or a passing whim of corporate executives. It was a radical shift in the destiny of the individual. Abram, “exalted father,” becomes Abraham, “father of the multitudes”; Jacob, “heel grabber,” becomes Israel, “he strives with God.”

Secondly, as the character of the individual developed, the name became synonymous with his or her reputation, which would resonate with the mere pronouncement of it. We may be deluded into thinking that names are arbitrary or inconsequential until we hear our name pronounced on someone else’s lips. Few among us would deny the surprising sense of elation we feel when someone of significance elevates our name with praise. So it was in Israel. To know one’s name and to call him by name was to reach into the deepest part of his being. A name was identical to the essence of an individual, uniting identity with destiny. I’ll never forget my delight when a friend researched the meaning of my family name during his stay in the British Isles. I already knew my first name meant “strong,” which was a delight to a boy who dreamed of being an athlete. But it wasn’t until my friend revealed the meaning of my middle and last names that I became aware of what true strength was to be used for. My middle name is my mother’s maiden name, Gilchrist, which in Gaelic means “servant of Christ,” while my last name, Morgan, means “born by the sea” in Welsh. Though my parents did not have this in mind, the name they gave me is a good reflection of the passions which God later infused in me.

II. The Gift of God's Name to Israel

A. Intimacy and availability

With that in mind we can begin to understand what an incomparable gift it was for Israel to possess God's name. While all other nations were stumbling in tyrannical darkness, enslaved by idolatry, Israel knew God by name. This gave them the incredible privilege of having personal access to the Creator God and all that he is. If an Israelite fought in God's name, as David did in his encounter with Goliath (1 Sam 17:45), he battled with God's might and power. If a prophet carried a message in God's name to his people, he came with the same authority as if God were fully present. Disobeying that word was tantamount to rejecting God's authority (Deut 18:18-19). For a priest to invoke the name in prayer would bring life and vitality to an individual (Num 6:27). When confronting idolatry, a prophet calling upon the name would unleash a heavenly arsenal on earth (1 Kgs 18:24, 36-39). In a time of cataclysmic judgment, anyone who called upon the name would be delivered and find salvation (Joel 2:32). To take refuge in the name was to find a shelter under God's protective care, so impenetrable that one would sing with shouts of joy (Ps 5:11). To fear the name after lapsing into idolatry could bring a restoration of spirit so complete it would be as if one had found a fountain of youth (Mal 4:2). To worship at the place where God had placed his name would be to experience an intimate meeting with God, and with it blessing and life (Exod 20:24).

B. Inaccessible mystery

But if knowing God's name suggests familiarity and intimacy, the particular name God chose also speaks of inaccessible mystery. When Moses asked God to reveal his name to him, God responded by saying, "I am who I am" (Exod 3:14). By using the verbal stem "to be" instead of a noun (like all other gods of the ancient world), Israel's God defies definition. There is something totally mysterious and "other" about this God. His name, Yahweh, indicates that he will not be confined to man's categories, nor will he place himself at his disposal. He is Holy Other: "I am who I am."

C. Ever-expanding knowledge

But that does not mean the name will forever remain unknowable. The use of the verb "to be" suggests that there will be a dynamic relationship with God and his people, so that as history unfolds, God "will be" whatever his people need him "to be," and will be revealing himself in surprising new ways which Israel could never have predicted. Therefore, as God faithfully fulfills his promises to his people over history, the name will take on greater and greater significance and Israel will grow into a deeper knowledge of the Holy.

When Israel had safely crossed the Red Sea, leaving Pharaoh's chariots awash in its midst, Moses sang to the glory of God's name, expanding its meaning to include the new manifestation of his power:

The LORD is a warrior (lit. "a man of war");

The LORD is His name. (Exod 15:3)

The patriarchs had worshiped the Lord but had never experienced him as a "man of war" who would use the entire creation to fight for and redeem his people. This is a dynamic new beginning, one never to be forgotten. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, Israel's saints continued to expand the meaning of the name as God kept acting in new and fresh ways to save them. When Yahweh did act, they would attach a noun to the verb "I am" to give it new definition and eternal significance for all generations. Titles like "The LORD

is My Banner" (Exod 17:15), "the LORD is Peace" (Judg 6:24), "the Lord is King" (Ps 10:16), "the LORD is my rock and my fortress" (Ps 18:2), "The LORD is my shepherd" (Ps 23:1), or "The LORD is my strength and my shield" (Ps 28:7), were not philosophical or abstract reflections by Israelite theologians, but exhilarating new discoveries by God's people living in the trenches. No wonder this name was supremely loved (Isa 56:6), feared (Ps 102:15; Isa 59:19), and memorialized (Ps 119:55). As Hans Bietenhard states: "The name of Yahweh, indeed, is such a powerful expression of his personal rule and activity that it can be used as an alternative way of speaking of Yahweh himself (Lev 18:21; Ps 7:17; Amos 2:7; Mic 5:4). It is the side of Yahweh which is turned towards men, in which Yahweh reveals himself."³ Perhaps all that human beings can know about God is found in his revealed name.

III. The Commandment To Protect His Name

But if possession of the name was a supreme privilege for Israel, it was also fraught with danger for God. Just as a book of signed checks in the hands of an adolescent places a parent's resources and reputation at great risk, so God's name on the lips of his people placed his reputation at risk. It was now possible to blaspheme or pollute the name. In the same way that we consider our reputation as one of our most precious possessions, so God cares deeply about his. Therefore the third commandment was vital to obey if Israel was to maintain her fidelity with God. With surprising brevity God makes the gravity of the matter quite clear:

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain." (Exod 20:7)

The initial phrase "you shall not lift up," probably means "you may not take upon the lips"⁴ (Ps 16:4)—which makes its application much broader than just the taking of oaths. We should not take the name of the Lord to our lips in any way that would injure or cause him harm. The operative word of the commandment, "vanity" (*shave*),⁵ has two basic interrelated meanings: that which is false or deceptive, and that which is ineffective, groundless and therefore untrustworthy.

A. Protecting the Name from all that is false

Regarding that which is false, the term is used in a wide range of contexts, from the courtroom, where someone gives false testimony under oath (Lev 19:11-12), to the more general act of spreading false rumors that have no substance or truth (Exod 23:1). *Shave*' is also used for worship that is false, laden with ritual but lacking in heart. In the opening chapter of Isaiah, the prophet denounces Israel's offerings as "worthless" (*shave*), not because they are ceremonially impure, but because the people who offer them are immoral and unjust. Behind pompous ceremony and lengthy prayers are cold hearts and greedy lives that trample the poor in the courtrooms.

Bring your worthless offerings no longer,

Incense is an abomination to Me.

New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—

I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. (Isa 1:13)

I wonder what kind of reaction would occur if one day a pastor announced in church, "I have heard of the abuse that went on in your homes last week and the exploitation of your workers in your corporate merger. So we are not going to take the offering today, because our worship is false." God judges our worship not by what we do in his name on Sunday, but by our godliness and character that

reflect his name during the week. If there is hypocrisy in the camp, God prefers no worship to false worship.

Along with false testimony and worship, the scripture speaks of false prophets, those who proclaim God's word in his name but whose visions are false. They receive the lengthiest tirade and greatest condemnation for profaning the third commandment (Jer 23:25-29; 27:15; 29:21-23; Ezek 13:6-16; 21:29; 22:28; Mic 3:5-7, 11) of any group. To deliberately misrepresent God as a prophet is to profane his name beyond recognition, because it takes advantage not only of God's vulnerability but also of his people's. A false prophet could cripple God's relationship with his people. Many who naively trusted in their visions, especially those that promised peace instead of judgment, felt betrayed by God when the visions proved false. Because of the seriousness of the crime, God's sentence was severe:

“The prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.” (Deut 18:20)

The modern counterpart occurs whenever Christians give false hope through their own “inspired” visions to victims of disease, promising them miracles of healing.⁶ Some of these Christians are well meaning but deluded; others are rank profiteers. Both are guilty of profaning God's name. Yet others may not claim to be prophets, but they misrepresent God with false teaching which states that a child or family member has fallen ill because of some undetected “generational sin” in the family; or that if the family had enough “faith,” physical healing would be guaranteed. When the vision fails, not only does the family have to work through the stabbing grief of death but the painful and unnecessary task of rebuilding their shattered faith in a God whom they felt had betrayed them. I am so grateful that when Emily and I buried our first two children we were surrounded by godly shepherds who helped us embrace the agony of death and glory in the resurrection. They gave honor to his name by not offering us false hope. Most are not so fortunate.

Because the potential of abusing God's name is so great among religious leaders, James gives a solemn warning to any enthusiastic upstarts. He explains that before stepping into that role they need to seriously consider that teachers who claim to speak in God's name will undergo a more severe judgment than others (Jas 3:1). A teacher's tongue can do untold damage if it dispenses “false” theology. To cause his hearers to feel the gravity of the matter, James seals his warning with a heart-stopping metaphor: “See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!” (Jas 3:5).

One of the greatest poets of the last century was the Romanian Jew, Paul Celan. In his home town of Czernowitz, the Romanian “army and police aided the Germans in obliterating a six-hundred-year Jewish presence: burning the Great Synagogue; imposing the yellow badge, plundering, torturing, and slaughtering community leaders and three thousand others the first twenty-four hours, driving Jews into a ghetto; and later deporting tens of thousands.”⁷ Celan was his family's sole survivor. After he fled to France he used his mother's tongue, German, as the vehicle to deconstruct the Nazi horror. For Celan, poetry was the essence of all that is true—in his case a tortured truth that was seeking a voice after endless columns of smoke had billowed through the chimneys of Auschwitz. If you consider such a man, and the truth he stood for, what do you think would be the greatest crime one could levy against his soul? Plagiarism! The charge was baseless, but it stung to the bone, especially because it was disseminated in Germany. Later, Celan wrote his reac-

tion: “Craft—that is a matter of hands. And these hands belong in turn to one person only... Only true hands write true poems. I see no basic distinction between a handshake and a poem.”⁸ Celan never got over it. Later he would put pen to his pain:

No one
witnesses for the
witness.

Perhaps from this example we can get a glimpse of how painful it is to God when anything false is attached to his name. What anguish this must cause him, since he alone is ultimate TRUTH. May we be vigilant to protect his name from all that is false.

B. Protecting the Name from all that is trivial

The second aspect of the term “vanity” concerns that which is ineffective, groundless and futile. God's name was given to Israel to be proclaimed among the nations until the whole earth was filled with his glory. As God told Pharaoh, “But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth” (Exod 9:16). Isaiah similarly affirms,

**And in that day you will say,
“Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name.
Make known His deeds among the peoples;
Make them remember that His name is exalted.” (Isa 12:4)**

How demeaning it is then to reverse the roles and use his great name to support our puny purposes. That would be like soliciting the president of the United States to use his office to endorse toothpaste or deodorant. Houtman puts it well: “The Israelite is forbidden, for whatever motive, to hitch YHWH to his own wagon, to misuse the luminance of the name YHWH. Anyone who commits that sin shows thereby to have no respect for YHWH whatsoever. He undermines YHWH's authority, the reputation which YHWH as the God of truth and justice enjoys among the people. He makes YHWH look ridiculous and is guilty of blasphemy.”⁹

Did you every pray in God's name for your sports team to win their game? I have, especially when my children were playing! We may think it is all harmless, but consider the implications when your team does win and the players believe that the victory was won in God's name. What does that communicate to the other team? Are they the Philistines? Then consider attaching God's name to your company, to your political party, or to our nation. I'm not comfortable when businessmen show me a business plan and announce that they are starting a “Christian company.” There are Christians who are businessmen and who function within their companies as godly examples in the way they do business and care for the poor. But there are no Christian companies, just as there are no Christian nations. How often has a nation blasphemed the name of God by going to war in his name?

Do not hitch the name of God to your wagon! I would even caution us against our presumptuous claims like “God led me to do such and such.” How do you know? For over and over again, God's name “gets dragged down to the level of the contexts in which it is used. As people hear it so used, they may come to associate the name of God fundamentally with a cause they wish to avoid or reject. Consequently, they will not be drawn to this God and the name will not receive its due honor and respect. At the deepest level, use of God's name is a matter of mission.”¹⁰ That is a proper use of the

name—to call upon the name to make the glory of the name known to all nations.

It is even more heinous when God's glorious name carries so little significance it is ridiculed in our jokes, evoked in our curses, or frivolously bandied about in our religious jargon. When our expressions like "Praise the Lord!" or its Hebrew counterpart "Hallelujah!" become clichés, spoken habitually without thought or purpose, they are leached of all their value. We must recover holiness in speech and language. "Eventually language itself loses its capacity for expressing wonder and adoration and intimacy, and most of all, belief and love. A word—any word—but beginning with the name 'God'—used 'in vain' soon becomes flattened into words that are only useful in 'getting and spending.'" ¹¹ In light of this it is instructive to ask, Do we really want Jesus' name on a billboard or a bumper sticker, or mass-marketed in any way? For the few who are "saved," how many more are inoculated and made immune to hearing? On a more personal level, I have to wonder how many of my words in a sermon are mere religious phrases that you have heard so many times you are deaf to their meaning, versus how many words are spoken out of silence and speak to your hearts like fresh morning dew. Perhaps there should be more silence in my sermons.

In summary, God's name is awesome and glorious. It is never to be perverted with what is false, trivial or secondary. The name is not a gift to be manipulated but a privilege to be preserved. May God grant us repentance for misusing his glorious Name.

IV. The Consequences of Abuse

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain." (Exod 20:7)

In the first and second commandments, God visits the iniquity through the third and fourth generations. But where the honor of his name is concerned, God repays the individual "to his face." When Jacob took God's name in vain by attaching God's holy name to his lying scheme before his father Isaac (Gen 27:20), and thus stole the blessing from Esau, he was driven into an exile of twenty years and never saw his mother again. And for engineering this manipulative scheme, Rebecca was written off the pages of Scripture, never to be heard from again. She is not even given an obituary.¹²

When Simeon and Levi used God's name and the rite of circumcision as a tool for murderous revenge (Gen 34), their tribes were disqualified from kingship (Gen 49:5-7). When Saul made a false vow to David, promising his daughter in marriage as a lure to bring about his death, it cost Saul his own life. Ironically, the hand that wanted to thrust the spear into David is the very one that killed the king; it was suicide.

My first encounter with the third commandment came when I was ten. I was at a friend's house, shooting baskets in the front yard. An inept basketball player, I wasn't even coming close to making a shot. To cover for my embarrassment I did what all young boys do: I swore. Growing up, I was well versed in the ethics of swearing. I was taught that I should never use profanity, but words like "hell" and "damn" were not that bad. So when I swore I used "selective" swearing. Then I heard some shocking profanity coming out of my friend's mouth. When I challenged him on his "foul" mouth, he retorted.

"You think I'm bad. You're taking God's name in vain—and he won't leave you unpunished!" That had a big impact on me. It may have been the first seed of the gospel sown in my heart. I'm grateful my friend had the courage to defend God's name. Perhaps we should be encouraged to follow his example.

V. The Cure for Profanity

Finally, what do you think might be the greatest help to cure us from our endless profanity so that we bring glory in the name of Jesus? The most helpful text to me is the one where Peter is cured of his profanity and blasphemy:

But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" (Mark 14:71)

Immediately, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, "Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:60-62)

That look on Jesus' face cured Peter. It is difficult to look at our Lord after he has been beaten on our behalf and not grieve for the anguish our profanity has caused him. From that moment, Peter went on to serve the name of Jesus faithfully unto death. May we do likewise. Amen.

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 252.

2. Carl E. Braaten, ed., *Our Naming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 1. Quoted by Donald E. Gowen, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 77.

3. Hans Bietenhard, "Name," *TDNT* 5:257.

4. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 2000), 3:35.

5. I have depended on Bruce Waltke's breakdown of this commandment for this section on the meaning of "vanity." Bruce K. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant," *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

6. I am not implying that I do not believe God can heal a sickness. I believe he can and does at times, but when he does, it is a gift of his grace and not a promise of the gospel.

7. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 12-13.

8. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 155.

9. Houtman, *Exodus*, 3:35.

10. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 228.

11. Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places*, 255.

12. This is Bruce Waltke's observation.