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“Taking God Seriously”

Exodus 20:7

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You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for God will not acquit the one who uses God's name in vain.

Exodus 20:7

My father, who was a Southern Baptist minister, loved this joke. A Quaker farmer is having trouble with his donkey. He cannot get the stubborn animal to move any direction the farmer wants him to move.

The donkey smiles at the farmer and says, "Isn't it frustrating being a Quaker and not being able to swear? I bet you would really like to swear right now."

The farmer thinks about it for a moment: "You're right. I will not swear at you, but I'm thinking about selling you to a Baptist."

Some people think the third commandment— "Don't take God's name in vain"—is a prohibition on swearing— "Thou shalt not cuss."

You have seen bumper stickers that claim to be from God, the ones that say, "Keep using my name in vain and I'll make rush hour longer."

Maybe you have passed a church with a sign out front that says, "God's last name is not damn."

Some started swearing when they were teenagers trying to fit in with their friends. Some stopped swearing when they met a teenager who had no interest in dating a sailor. Some started cursing when they had their first crying baby. Some stopped cursing when the child was old enough to repeat whatever came out of their parents' mouths.

A few of you don't curse much, so you think a sermon on the third commandment is a fine idea. Others think a sermon on this verse sounds like a heckuva waste of time—or something like that. If the commandment is about using God's name as an unholy exclamation point, then some can put a check by this commandment, and forget about it, and others can admit that we are not going to get a check by this commandment, and forget about it. If cleaning up our language is all there is to this commandment, then it certainly does not belong in the top ten.

But this is more than a verse for your mother to use when she asks, "Where did I go wrong?"

Casual profanity may be the least of our offenses against this commandment. To get what this verse—"Don't take God's name in vain"—is after, we need to remember how important names were to the Hebrew people. For us, a name is usually just a means of distinguishing between one person and another.

In ancient Israel, a name sums up the essence of a person. Your name means something. Your name tells others who you are. There is power in a name, power in being able to call someone by name. The same is true with God's name.

Moses asks God, "What's your name? What are you like?"

God says the divine name is YHWH, or something like that. YHWH probably means, "I am who I am" or "I will be what I will be." Even if it is tongue-in-God's-cheek, YHWH's the name Moses uses for God, and it sticks. The original texts of the Hebrew Scriptures do not include vowels, so in effect, Y-H-W-H is all that appears.

Since they believe that God's name is too holy to be used by just anybody, it is spoken only by the high priest and only once a year, at Yom Kippur, in the Holy of Holies. The result of this cautious practice is that, after a while, no one knows what vowels belong between the four consonants. The proper pronunciation of the name Moses heard is lost, because they are so careful about not saying God's name unnecessarily.

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus begins with a name for God, then suggests an attitude toward that name: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name."

By giving God a family name, Abba, Jesus teaches us that God is personal. But if anyone should presume to be familiar with God, Jesus reminds them that God's name—whatever name we use—is holy. Jesus gives a positive version of the third commandment: "Treat God's name as holy."

When Jesus goes to the temple at Passover, and finds a congregation acting as if God is unimportant, he gets angry. He shouts, "Stop making God's house a marketplace." Jesus takes God seriously.

To the Israelites this commandment is the sort of warning you see around power plants: "Danger—High Voltage." This is the only commandment with an immediate threat of punishment: "God will not overlook the selfish use of God's name." We could paraphrase this commandment: "Don't use God's name unless you mean it, unless you're serious about it" (John Killinger, *To My People with Love*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1988, 39).

We are so used to hearing God's name used thoughtlessly that we hardly notice. Politicians take God's

name in vain to get votes. When a candidate closes with “And God bless America” reporters should ask, “What do you mean by that? Are you asking God to bless America by helping us share more resources with God’s hungry children?”

Have you noticed that during football games we hear God mentioned more often than during baseball games? Baseball players almost never bow and pray after hitting home runs, but there are football players who kneel in the end zone after touchdowns. The Christian university I attended had prayers before football games, but not before basketball games. Does that make sense?

We are still waiting for a player that loses a big game to say, “I want to blame my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for this loss. He didn’t help us nearly enough today.”

To call on the name of God for victory over one’s enemies, either on election day, the playing field, or the battlefield, is using God’s name in an empty way. In campaigns, games, and wars, both sides want to give the impression that God is on their side. And yet, it is not just Dak Prescott, Eric Adams, and Joe Biden who are tempted to speak holy words in meaningless ways. We are.

We break this commandment when we pretend to worship, when we sing a hymn without thinking, when we hear a prayer without praying. This commandment warns us that the name of God should not be thrown around as though it does not matter. Holy words become empty. We speak of God too lightly.

Or we do not speak of God at all. More than 60% of Americans identify as Christian, but you would not know it from listening to us. A tiny 7% say they talk about spiritual matters regularly. Of Christians who attend church, only

13% say they have a spiritual conversation at least once a week (Jonathan Merritt). An overwhelming majority say they don't feel comfortable speaking about faith. We are good at small talk, but our conversations often stall when the subject turns spiritual.

William F. Buckley said, "In New York, if you don't want to be invited to cocktail parties, mention God twice."

When some of us moved from the Bible Belt to New York we ran into an unexpected language barrier. We had to find new, and, in some ways, more honest ways to talk about God.

The decline in sacred speech is not a recent trend. By searching the Google Ngram corpus — a collection of millions of books, newspapers, and webpages published since 1500—we can determine the frequency of word usage over the centuries. This data shows that most religious words have been declining in use since the early 20th century.

A study in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* analyzed 50 terms associated with virtue—words like "love," "patience," "gentleness" and "faithfulness"—have become much rarer. In the last century, humility words, like "modesty," fell 52%. Compassion words, like "kindness," dropped 56%. Gratitude words, like "thankfulness," declined 49%.

Most of us are not guilty of talking too much about God. We are not the kind of church in which we are in danger of saying "Praise God" too often. We are in danger of the other extreme, of trivializing God by not mentioning God, of not taking God seriously enough to speak of God, or to God. When we call on God without meaning it,

we break this commandment, but the real blasphemy is not calling on God at all. How much do we live without reference to the gifts that surround us? To avoid thinking and talking about God is to live as an agnostic, sliding towards practical atheism.

In the Book of Job, Job's first words after he loses everything are shocking. His opening volley may be the most surprising statement in the Bible. Job says, literally in the Hebrew: "God damn the day I was born and the night that God forced me from the womb" (Job 3.2) (Rachel Mikva, *Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves*, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1999, 37-38).

Job uses God's name to curse God's gift of life. But that's not the stunning part. At the end of the Book of Job, God says this to Eliphaz, one of Job's religious counselors: "I am angry at you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has. . . My servant Job will pray for you and for his sake I will overlook your sin."

God is not concerned about Job's swearing. God appreciates Job's honesty more than his friends' glib religious language. God knows when we are faking it and when we are being honest.

"Don't use God's name unless you're serious about it" is a commandment that catches us: when we are casual churchgoers who aren't committed to ministry, when we are so sure of our ourselves that we act as if our opinions are the ones by which other opinions should be measured, when we tell ourselves that we do not need to change a thing and ignore God's call for justice, when we judge

others by how much their ideas about God differ from our own, and when we want people to believe that we are better than we are.

Taking God's name seriously means that we speak truthfully to God, ourselves, and one another. Our prayers and hopes have to be honest. The commandment is to talk about God in words that come from deep within us. We should speak God's name with sincerity. We should speak God's name asking for justice and compassion. We should speak God's name asking God to change our apathy.

The German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, is with a friend standing in front of the majestic Cathedral of Amiens, France.

His friend says, "Tell me, Heinrich, why can't people build like this anymore?"

The poet replies: "In those days people had commandments. Now we have opinions. It takes more than opinions to build a cathedral."

People who take God seriously do more than have opinions. They make sacrifices. They care about their neighbors, especially the hungry ones. They put their money where their mouth is. They stand up for what's right. They don't look for applause. They don't scare so easy.

If we take God seriously, we look for God's presence. We ask different questions. Where do we see signs of hope? How do we take a magnifying glass to the ordinary, in order to see the extraordinary? Where do we see love in our home? When do we feel grace in our routines? Where do we see joy on our commute? What do we miss when pass by too fast?

Where do we encounter God's graciousness in our meals, shared or alone, quick or leisurely? Where do we hear God's voice in the media? Where do we see God's kindness on our devices? Where do we encounter God's peace in our family, friends, and coworkers? Where do we feel the Spirit? How can we let God guide us to lives that matter?

God invites us to be honest and true, to take God seriously. Take God hopefully. Take God joyfully. Take God gratefully. Let God take us.

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