

“Ten Commandments: What’s In a Name?”

1 Peter 4:7-16 • Jeremiah 7:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 9, 2020

“What’s in a name?” That’s the question Juliette ponders in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliette*. She says, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet.” Romeo and Juliette are forbidden from seeing each other because of the blood feud between their families. So Juliette argues that if Romeo had any other name they could be together, happily ever after. As you know, however, they cannot just discard their names and they do not live happily ever after.

That’s because, as Shakespeare knew, our names ARE important. A name is more than just a title that can be changed or discarded. Your name represents your identity – both how you see yourself and how others see you. It’s a major part of who you are. One of the first responsibilities of a new parent is to give a child his or her name. This is a big responsibility, even if not everyone takes it seriously. The truth is that our children grow into what we name them. More than that, they carry YOUR name and your family identity. This goes for nicknames that we get as well as compliments and insults. If a child is repeatedly labeled as ugly or weak or told she’s not smart, that’s how she will begin to see herself.

Names are also personal. Usually a relationship has to reach a certain level of familiarity before we are on a “first name basis” with someone. Your first name is more personal than your family name. Most personal of all is your full name. When your mother calls you by your full name you know you’re in serious trouble. She’s using the most personal language possible to speak to get your attention.

Third, your name represents your reputation. It’s often said that the only thing you can truly call your own is your good name. Similarly, if you get a bad reputation it’s hard to clear your name, especially if the bad reputation

is true. Many large corporations aggressively defend their trademarks, which is their name. Politicians and newspaper editors are just some of the people who have received strongly worded letters from companies like Xerox for misusing their name. If you order Coke at your favorite restaurant and suspect that it’s something else, Coca-Cola has a team that travels around the country testing fountain sodas that claim to be Coke, making sure they are in fact Coca-Cola. These companies defend their brands because they have invested heavily in them.

That’s a good analogy of what the Third Commandment is about. God is interested in protecting His holy name. The Third Commandment, found in Exodus 20:7, says, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” At first this may seem insignificant compared to some of the other commandments. It’s not. God takes this very seriously and so should we.

The Bible shows us that God is not some distant, unknown being. He is personal. God knows you by name and we know Him by name. In Exodus 3, Moses is tending sheep in the wilderness as he’s been doing for the forty years since he ran away from Egypt. God appears to him in a bush that is on fire but is not being burned and tells Moses He wants him to go back to Egypt and help the Israelites to escape. Moses says, “Who should I say sent me? What do I tell them when you ask me your name?” God replies with His personal, divine name. God says, “I AM WHO I AM. Tell them I AM sent you.” In Hebrew God’s name is usually pronounced Yahweh. The Jewish people revered God’s name so much that they wouldn’t even say it out loud. Once a year on the Day of Atonement the priest was permitted to speak God’s name. Scholars have pointed out, though, that they seem to have added restrictions that

God didn't intend since His divine name appears over 7,000 times in the Old Testament.

But God *does* intend for us to keep his name holy. In fact, in Leviticus 24:16 God says, "Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him." The reason is because God's name represents His holy presence and His reputation. To use His name improperly is to insult God Himself, which is why the first petition of the Lord's Prayer is, "hallowed be your name." We're praying that we would keep God's name holy in our mind and heart.

So what exactly is it that the third commandment is prohibiting? Is it just that we're not to use foul language or take oaths? No. It's so much more than that. The first thing that is prohibited by this commandment is using God's name irreverently. It would be nearly impossible to go a couple of hours, much less an entire day, without hearing someone say something like, "Oh my God." It's frequently shortened to OMG but it means the same thing. It's also common to hear people use the name of Jesus as an expletive. They are not referring to Jesus the Incarnate Son of the Most High God. They are just using the name casually and irreverently. If you find yourself doing that you really should stop because it's an insult to God.

A second way we misuse God's name is by using it in making promises or oaths. The problem is not making an oath and ending it with "so help me God." Many of you have used those words when you solemnly swore to support and defend the constitution of the United States. The problem is saying it when you don't mean it, for something that's not true. If you find yourself using "I swear to God" in your conversation, you are probably misusing God's name. Jesus said there's no reason to do that. Just let your yes be yes and your no be no.

A third way we tend to misuse God's name these days is what amounts to false prophesy. Those of us who are actively involved in the

church are tempted with this one. We might say, "God told me to do or say this." Worse is like the person in a church we belonged to years ago. When she was trying to recruit people to volunteer on the project she headed she would corner people and say, "God told *me* that *you* are supposed to help with this." God doesn't work that way and so using God's name to accomplish our own personal plans is a violation of the third commandment. Sometimes it's very subtle. We just launched our building fund campaign last week and it can be very tempting to say that God has revealed these plans to us and wants us to make these renovations. That would be a stretch. We believe it's the right thing to do at this time. We want to make the changes in order to honor God. But we can't say that He has instructed us to do this. To do so is to violate the commandment by using God's name in that way.

Those three are probably how many of you have understood this commandment in the past. It's how I had always heard it explained. But I think there's something greater here that we've been missing. The Hebrew literally translates to "Do not *lift up* the name of the LORD your God in vain," or for nothing. As Christians we lift up the name of Christ and take it as our own. In the passage known as the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus instructs his followers to make disciples, baptizing them in the *name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Part of the meaning of baptism is naming us with the name of God. Then when we publicly profess our faith in Jesus, making it our own faith, we are confirming that we want to be known by His name. When you take the name Christian, or Christ-follower, *you* represent God everywhere you go. Everything you say and do reflects on Him.

In our New Testament reading, Peter says, "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a

meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.” As followers of Jesus we have His identity. We either uphold or soil His reputation. This is why God takes this commandment so seriously. “The LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

This is what God is saying through the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 7. The people would say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” They thought the words would be enough. God says, “you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my *name*, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations?”

The same thing applies to you and me. If we claim to be Christians, claim the name of God, but then live and act in ways that disobey His word, we are taking His name in vain. If we somehow reject Jesus as God in person, seeing

him as merely a good teacher or the best human, we are violating the commandment.

So how do we actually keep this commandment? The first thing is to think and speak about Jesus reverently. That begins in your worship. You should come to worship not for what you get out of it but to offer your genuine praise to Jesus. Another way to say that is to love Christ with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And then, as we heard in 1 Peter, “keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: when you speak, do it as one who speaks oracles of God; when you serve, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever.” In other words, love your neighbor as yourself. So what's in a name? If it's God's name...everything!

Amen.