

(Devotional #25) **Christian Liberty and the Law – The Ten Commandments:**  
**Honoring God's Name**  
(Exodus 20:7)

**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 – Exodus 20:7**

**For this reason, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him THE NAME THAT IS ABOVE EVERY NAME, so that at THE NAME OF JESUS, EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth – Philippians 2:9-10**

**Let them praise THE NAME OF THE LORD, for He commanded and they were created – Psalm 148:5**

**What's in a name?** Well, if your name is Jeff or Rocky – not much! Today a name is not much more than a label – a sound to which we are conditioned to reply by saying the word, **'WHAT'?** But as recently as a century ago, a person's name told us something about that person. For example, the name **'Sherwood'** is an Anglo-Saxon name that identified the family's place of origin, which was near Nottingham and Derbyshire in England. The most famous occurrences of Sherwood are associated with **'Sherwood Forest'** and Robin Hood! On the other hand, **'Miller'** is an occupational name, indicating a profession commonly associated with the Miller family.

In Biblical times, names were much more than appellatives; names were descriptive of the character of the person. In anticipation of the birth of Isaac, through whom God would honor His covenant with Abram, God changed the Patriarch's name from **'Abram'** (**'exalted father'**) to **'Abraham'** (**'father of a multitude'**). God did the same for Jacob, whom He renamed **'Israel,'** and there are many more examples in Scripture of God giving new names to individuals.

But there are no names in Scripture or elsewhere more important than the names of God. There are over thirty names for God in the Old Testament alone, and if we include terms used as allusions to Him, the number rises to over one hundred! And every one of these names reveals something about **HIS CHARACTER** and **HIS DIVINE ATTRIBUTES**. In Devotional #23, we discussed specifically the divine names, **'Elohim'** (*emphasizing God's Power*), **'I AM,'** (*revealing God's Self-existence*), and **'Yahweh,'** (*God's Covenant-name and also His Memorial-name*<sup>1</sup>).

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment emphasizes the importance of not treating God's Name as common. God's Name is **HOLY** because His Name represents the essence of who God is, and it does so in a way that far exceeds how we use names in modern societies.

Isaiah described himself as **"ruined, a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips"**<sup>2</sup>. Because of the natural man's innate sinfulness in the sight of God, Jews would not pronounce God's Memorial-name, fearing if that **HOLY NAME** were allowed to pass through the unclean lips of a man, he would have violated the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment. So even today, you will hear Jews refer to God as **'HA-SHEM'**<sup>3</sup> (*meaning, 'THE NAME'*). It also is common practice among pious Jews, when reading Scripture, not to say aloud God's Memorial-name but to substitute the spoken word, **'ADONI'** (*meaning 'Lord'*) for **'YAHWEH.'** Even when corresponding in English,

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<sup>1</sup> See Exodus 3:13-15

<sup>2</sup> See Isaiah 6:1-7 (especially verse 5)

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word for **'NAME'** is שֵׁם – (pronounced **'shem'** ... sounds like **'shame'**). Often the phrase **'Ha-Shem'** (**'THE NAME'**) is used in place of God's Covenant / Memorial-name, Yahweh, which Jews view as too holy to pronounce.

many Jews will write the general term ‘**God**’ as ‘**G-d**’ ... again in an effort not to violate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment.

Beyond this, though the scribes view all Scripture as holy, when writing the Memorial-name of God, there is a separate quill that is used solely for writing the name, ‘**YAHWEH**’.<sup>4</sup> Once written, the scribe will pick up his other writing instruments and continue copying the words of Scripture. This is still done today by orthodox Rabbis when they pen copies of the Torah.

A proper interpretation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment rests on a correct understanding of the terms **NAME** and **VAIN**.

- (1) **Yahweh is the Covenant / Memorial-name of God** – *It is the name He uses when dealing with His people, Israel – also it can be thought of as His Salvation-name.* Yahweh is the name that links believing Jews of every generation to Abraham, to the Patriarchs, and to the covenants God made with the nation. As such, to use God’s Covenant-name in vain is to minimize the covenants, and even one’s own salvation.

From Hebrews 1:1-2, we know God’s revelation of Himself was done progressively, in many different ways, over the span of human history. When God revealed Himself in these earlier times, how did He do it? He did it primarily through His Name. Though Abraham knew the appellation, ‘*Yahweh*,’ God more fully explained the significance of that Name to Moses as ‘**I AM**’ in Exodus 3:13-14. Then in Exodus 15:26, God showed Himself to Israel as ‘*the Healer and Sustainer of the nation.*’ Among others, Jeremiah knew Him as ‘*the Lord our Righteousness,*’ and Isaiah as ‘*the Holy One*’.<sup>5</sup>

God took the initiative to reveal Himself so we can know Him – so we can know what He is like, how He acts, and what is valuable to Him. Therefore, when we use His Name lightly, flippantly, we in essence are belittling His reputation; we are remaking Him in our image and dishonoring His Name. **Always remember this: in Semitic thinking, the NAME and the PERSON are synonymous** – there is no difference in the name and the essence of the person. So, to misuse the Name of God is to misrepresent the essence of who God is. Trivializing God’s Name is one of the worst offenses a believer can commit.

- (2) ‘**VAIN**’ – The Hebrew word translated ‘**vain**’ is נָשָׁו (pronounced ‘*shav*’). It means: ‘**emptiness, vanity, falsehood,**’ or ‘**void of purpose**’ – It is used 52-times in the Old Testament, but by far the most well-known occurrence is here in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment.

When you study how this term is used elsewhere in the Bible, you find:

- It can be used to refer to a false testimony or to false witness against a neighbor.
- It can refer to false worship, specifically, worship that is correct in form but lacking in spiritual substance.
- It can mean making an insincere oath, *i.e.*, swearing falsely.
- It can refer to the proclamation of falsehoods about God Himself. Prophets who spoke falsely (*vainly*) in the Name of God violated this commandment, and it was a violation

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<sup>4</sup> After the Babylonian Captivity (roughly between 605 B.C and 516 B.C) the Jews adopted the Aramaic alphabet, which they learned in Babylon. Prior to the captivity, Hebrew was written in what today is known as ‘the Proto-Hebrew alphabet.’ In some Old Testament manuscripts that are written using this Aramaic alphabet, when the scribes would write the Divine Name, they would write it using the Proto-Hebrew script in order to honor God’s Holy Name.

<sup>5</sup> See Jeremiah 23:6 and Isaiah 6:3.

that was considered so serious that it carried the death penalty in Israel. *(If a prophet said, “**THUS SAITH THE LORD, ” THE LORD BETTER HAVE SAID IT!**”)*

*In more contemporary settings:*

- Churches that proclaim false theology violate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment. Throughout Scripture there is a strong focus on teaching correct doctrine. This is because false doctrine misrepresents who God is – and in so doing, violates His Name.
- Christians who claim to have heard God speak, but who have **not** heard him speak, break this commandment. When a false teacher asserts, ‘*God said something to me,*’ or ‘*He gave me a special message*’ that in fact He did not give to that teacher, he or she is giving a false testimony regarding God Himself and is violating the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment.
- When God’s Name is *invoked in the context of the trivial and the mundane*, this commandment may be broken. There is nothing trivial about God. To refer to the Infinite Creator as, ‘*the man upstairs,*’ is an example of invoking the Name (*essence*) of God in an improper and disrespectful manner.
- Bumper Sticker Theology (*or clichés*) may break this commandment. The ‘*Honk if you love Jesus*’ bumper stickers trivialize the Name of the Savior and are an affront to God’s expectation of **REVERENCE** that is rightly due His Name.
- When someone says something that must be followed by the disclaimer, ‘*hopefully God has a sense of humor,*’ he may be dangerously close to breaking the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment.
- When preachers invoke God’s Name for the purpose of self-enrichment, they are without doubt violating this commandment.
- To invoke the Holy Name of God in the act of swearing is to disrespect God Himself and to do so is a violation of the commandment to speak respectfully of God’s Name. Many of us were taught that ‘*taking God’s name in vain*’ only meant using the words ‘*God*’ and ‘*damn*’ in the same sentence. Our parents were correct to teach us not to say such things. But ‘*taking God’s name in vain*’ means so much more than this. It includes using God’s Name in the context of any vulgar language, in off-color jokes, or by what we might call ‘*gutter talk.*’ When we use God’s name as the exclamation point to a sentence, as in ‘*Oh my God,*’ – God’s Name is being treated with dishonor.

We may think the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment is broken primarily by unbelievers, after all, just listen to the language in the workplace, at the mall, and on television. But ask yourselves this question: ***TO WHOM WAS THIS COMMANDMENT GIVEN? IT WAS GIVEN TO THE BELIEVING NATION OF ISRAEL.*** The Church is not Israel, but we stand in a covenant relationship with God, having been grafted into the blessings and benefits of the New Covenant<sup>6</sup>.

The point of our lesson is not to list every possible way to break the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment – *the rabbis have ample lists of how to do this if you want to read them* – nor is it to treat the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment from the perspective of a legalist ... but rather to point out that all believers, whether in Israel or in the Church, are to respect the sanctity of God’s Name.

Moses provided Israel a warning regarding the consequences of disrespecting God’s Name:

*If you are not careful to observe all the words of this law which are written in this book, to fear this honored and awesome NAME OF YAHWEH your God, then YAHWEH will bring extraordinary plagues on you and your descendants, even severe and lasting*

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<sup>6</sup> See Jeremiah 31:31 and Romans 11:17-24

*plagues, and miserable and chronic sicknesses. He will bring back on you all the plagues of Egypt of which you were afraid, and they will cling to you – Deuteronomy 28:58-60*

Moses told Israel to hold God's Name *in reverence* and *to respect it*, for it represents God Himself. It is not for use in *purposeless conversations or jokes*, and God will not hold guiltless those who do such things. For Israel, misuse of the divine name risked God bringing on Israel the very plagues he laid on the Egyptians that led to the Exodus.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment connects the Divine Name – *an extension of God's very Being* – with Yahweh Himself. Whatever respect is attributed to '*THE-NAME*' is attributed to *YAHWEH*, and whatever disrespect is ascribed to '*THE-NAME*,' also is ascribed to *YAHWEH*.

***In the simplest of terms, misuse of the divine name is a sacrilege<sup>7</sup>.*** We are not to express God's Name '*without purpose*,' *i.e.*, we are not to treat it as common ... for His Name is Holy. Furthermore, the Name of God is not to be used to manipulate God in any manner for our own purposes. It is ***not a magic word*** that can be used by men to influence God to '*do cosmic tricks*' for our pleasure. Gideon was borderline, when he '*tested Yahweh*,' but recognizing the weakness of man, God honored Gideon's requests and did not take vengeance on him.

As we have stressed in our previous lessons, Christians are not under the Mosaic Law as a form of governance. We do not earn our salvation by keeping the Law, and we are not sanctified or glorified by any kind of law-keeping. But the Law serves a purpose, ***first*** to demonstrate just how short of God's standard of Absolute Righteousness we fall<sup>8</sup>, and ***second***, in so doing it reveals God's Holy Nature to us in tangible ways we can understand. Not taking God's Name in vain will not bring us salvation, nor will it sanctify us ... but in view of our salvation, how can we even consider doing so? The Ten Commandments are guides for living in a manner that is pleasing to God. And obedience is an act of gratitude, enabled by the Holy Spirit, for God's glory. Christian Liberty means our salvation rests in God's unboundless Grace, but it does not mean it is proper to ignore the Moral Law of God revealed in the Decalogue.

On a positive note, what are some ways we can honor God's Name?

One way to honor God's Name is to give Him praise and share the gospel – Isaiah 12:4 reads: "*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.*"

In Acts 11:26, the disciples were first called '*CHRISTIANS*' – We who bear the Name of Christ, represent Christ to the world. How we live reflects on His Name – and therefore, our behavior reflects on our Savior. Our attitudes, the words we speak, and the actions we take ... matter. *The world will know we are followers of Jesus by the way we love one another<sup>9</sup>.*

Simply stated, as we proclaim God's deeds (*what God did to procure our salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ: the Gospel*), and as we show love toward each other (*expressed by patience, kindness, and a humble spirit<sup>10</sup>, etc.*), we honor God's Name in accordance with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Exodus 23:20-21; 1 Kings 8:33-34; Psalm 54:3; 86:9; 118:26; 148:5; Ephesians 1:18-21

<sup>8</sup> See Galatians 3:11 & 24

<sup>9</sup> See John 13:35

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7