

Name Calling

3. You must not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

There are a few ways translators have translated this verse:

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God – NRSV

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain – NASB

You are not to use lightly the name of *ADONAI* your God – CJB

You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God – JPS

When I was growing up this Commandment simply meant not to use God or Jesus as a naughty word... as a swear word. But as we have seen over the past two weeks these Commandments are saying much more than we realise. It is talking about *misusing* God's name. But how does one misuse God's name? Because if we're not sure what it is saying, how can we be sure if we're not doing it? Have we been misusing God's name without even realising it?

We live in a time when people use the word "God" for all kinds of things. I'm not talking about bad language – like if we hit our finger with a hammer. But rather how people don't even think twice about using God – particularly in churches, in Christian circles. Indeed people in churches are quite happy to state what God maybe saying or thinking at any particular time or place or about a certain topic or even what God was doing in biblical accounts (usually God is in agreement with the one speaking).

I remember in church when people prayed and when they believed that God was speaking through them usually talked like this, "Thus says the Lord... I will bless my people who do not watch TV Sunday nights but worship with their brethren and sisters at church, starting at 7pm.....whatever." God always seemed to talk in the King James Version of the Bible also.

Today many people - Christians - don't think twice about what they think God's perspective on things are in church matters or world affairs, what the Bible is really saying or what other people should be doing. We don't think twice about it and often we don't think twice about saying what God wants to happen also. Perhaps this is the blasphemy this Commandment speaks of; using the name of God lightly.

In the Bible a name is a very important thing. Names were far more than a tag on a person – the person giving the name inferred ownership of that person (see how often God changed the names of Abraham and Jacob for instance). The name *was* the person. When something was done in the name of another person, it was as if that person were actually there. **It gave servants the power of their masters.**

In the OT even saying the name of God was so sacred that people didn't speak it. When the writers began writing the books of the Bible they used a substitute for God's name: YHWH was the word or more specifically a symbol used to represent God (no one today actually knows the real pronunciation of YHWH. Because YHWH wasn't spoken and in time it was replaced by the word Adonai – My Lord, which was spoken. Then at some point someone combined the two names using the consonants of YHWH with the vowels of Adonai and coming up with Yahoweh or Yahweh. When the Bible was translated in Latin Yahweh was translated again into Jehovah – but this word really doesn't mean anything. Most scholars believe that this combination of letters misunderstood the ancient Hebrew practice of how God's name was treated.

The origins of YHWH go back to Moses and people think that it in some ways represents the translation "I AM". What is clear is that YHWH is used as the name for Israel and the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel. It clearly represented their special relationship. But, as I said before, the name is far more than simply an identification or even a role.

One biblical scholar says:

"What this name represents then *is God*. And speaking this name meant something very significant, something very real. What must be understood is that the "name" of YHWH bespeaks God's powerful presence and purpose." W. Brueggemann.

Saying God's name is something that should never be taken lightly, because it is connected to Almighty God. And however loving and caring we know God is – we cannot and should not underestimate or undermine God's majesty and splendour. Or as people used to say the terrible God – terrible defined as intense, serious, grave, awe-inspiring, fearful...

Therefore to speak on behalf of God, to use God's name is something we should do with the utmost caution. Almost like trying to defuse a bomb – one moves very carefully. And to be sure that we aren't simply using God's name to back up one's own ideas or agenda. There are stories of a person coming to minister and saying that God told him that the church needed to do a certain thing. The minister responded by saying that was interesting because God didn't say anything like that to him.

This is what this Commandment seems to be warning us about – using God for one's own purposes – as a genie one may again say. And how often does that occur in our lifetime? Anyone who tries to use YHWH for their own means – even for the best possible reasons – will find themselves open to YHWH's judgement. In the same way as the second Commandment – trying to make YHWH into our image. The Commandments are clear – don't bring God down to our level, but realise and know who God truly is. We worship a truly awe-inspiring God.

Our prayers, in the name of Jesus Christ, are a direct connection to this Commandment. How often do we add on “in the name of Jesus we pray” or something similar as a way of hoping authorising our prayer and making it work – so to speak – hoping God will do what we want? When we looked at prayer one of the things that is emphasised is the need that prayer isn't so much about us giving God advice or insight into particular issues. Because when we think about it – just for a second – we realise how absurd the whole concept is. Our prayers aren't to command God to our bidding. Much more important is the need for us to commune with God, to respond to what God maybe calling us to do in that certain situation – to see God's will at work. Yes, we can still bring something before God – but for God to deal with, not for us to tell God what to do.

These first three Commandments are clearly intended to put God in his proper place in our life. To take seriously and earnestly the concept that God is actually God – Creator of the heavens and the earth, all powerful, all majestic, holy and awesome. This is the same God that angels and archangels fall face down before – Ps.97. Yet so often we have made this God so small and impotent and indeed familiar – like an old reliable pal. We get mad and frustrated if God doesn't do what we want. Sometimes even saying that God just doesn't care about us.

We remember that worshipping God in this covenant relationship we have requires total devotion on our part. That God is truly our first priority – not any other gods. All these warnings are intended that we *do not* take our focus off God and place it on ourselves first; warnings that we don't try to change who God truly is; a warning to make God something or someone who becomes our tool to use as we please.

And our very real difficulty is that at this time, in this world we are living in, where one's own needs seem paramount – as we see on advertisements, the emphasise on meeting our needs, both real and imaginary, need to be overshadowed and surpassed by these three Commandments. They still speak to us as clearly as the day they were written, by the hand of God. But also, today it may be harder than ever before to be able to do this, because we – especially in the West – are so accustomed to getting our needs met, having control, attaining comfort. Most of us are keenly aware when our needs aren't met or are being hindered – slow drivers holding us up, the water or power cut off for a morning, preacher goes on too long and the pew hurts my back...

These first three Commandments are ultimately summed up by the words of Jesus Christ – “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the **first** Commandment and this is the **greatest** commandment.” (Matt.22, Mk.12, Lk.10).

This is the starting point... this is the foundation... this is the essential reality of what the Christian faith is all about. It doesn't change – it never will.