

ABUSING THE HOLY NAME
EXODUS 20: 7

INTRODUCTION:

I read in the paper about an incident that happened in Michigan a few weeks ago.

A father was arrested by the police department in Michigan and accused of breaking an ancient law in that state. The law forbids the use of obscenities and blasphemy in the presence of children. This father was overheard using such language in the presence of his children and was consequently arrested. Not only was he arrested for this offense, but under Michigan law was actually convicted for this crime. As I read this report, it occurred to me, do we have enough jails in this country to put all the people in who are guilty of this offense? There is so much dishonoring of the name of the Lord in public and in private conversation in our society, that it would be impossible to incarcerate all of the offenders.

However, we must keep in mind that the third commandment addresses this question. It forbids the misuse of the name of the Lord. This offense was considered to be one of the most serious offenses that could be committed by an Israelite in the Old Testament and was subject to the death penalty. Do we dare take this commandment seriously in the 21st century? What is the background and significance of this particular commandment for us as we live in the 21st century?

I. THE NAME OF THE LORD IS HOLY.

We need to be clear in our minds about the significance of the name of the Lord. In the Biblical world the name of a person is almost synonymous with the person himself. To abuse the name of a person was considered an abuse against the person. The name represented everything that the person was. The name was often given to a person to reflect their character. You will remember that when God changed Jacob, He changed his name to reflect that change. He gave him the name Israel to reflect the change that had been made in his character.

In the Old Testament the name of the Lord is a reflection of who He is - He is holy! It is the reality of the holiness of God that makes the abuse of His name such a serious matter.

Let us remember some statements that are found in the worship section of the Old Testament. The Psalmist David wrote, "In Him our hearts rejoice for we trust in His holy name" (Psalms 33:21). "We trust in His holy name!" To say that the name of the Lord is holy means that His name is consistent with His character. The God of the Bible is a holy God so His name is holy. It also suggests that His name is separate and different. To say God is holy is to suggest there is something different

about God. There is a chasm between the divine reality and our human experience. Even though we are created in the image of God, God is still different from us. His name is holy.

The Psalmist gave another statement that reflects this reality, "Let them praise your great and awesome name - He is holy" (Psalm 99:3). When the Psalmist thought about the God to whom he prayed and the God that he worshipped, he remembered that this God is worthy of all praise and honor because of His name. His name is an awesome name because it reflects His character. Then he makes that affirmation, "He is Holy." We must never forget that however we use the name of the Lord we are using a holy name.

This is the reason that our Lord taught us to pray as a part of our daily prayer discipline, "Father, hallowed be your name" (Luke 11:2). This is a prayer that we ourselves and those for whom we pray in our world may be aware that His name is holy and regard it and treat it accordingly. This is the petition that precedes all other petitions. Nothing is more important than the recognition that God's name is holy and treating it in light of this holiness. So the foundation for all that we will include in our study tonight is this truth - the name of the Lord is holy!

II. THE ABUSE OF THE NAME OF THE LORD IS SIN.

This brings us to the burden of this commandment. For anyone to misuse the name of the Lord or to abuse the name of the Lord is to be guilty of horrible sin against holy God. God gave a word of instruction to Moses in the book of Leviticus when He said, "Tell Aaron and his sons to treat with respect the sacred offerings that the Israelites consecrate to me, so they will not profane my holy name. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 22:2). This was the attitude that was to characterize everything that Aaron and his sons, who served in the priesthood after him, did. They were to do everything with awareness that God is holy. For them to treat the offerings that came from the people as though they were ordinary or common offerings was to profane the name of the Lord. Such profanation against His name would be a terrible offense against the Lord God.

We are always in danger of misusing the name of the Lord. There are several ways that this may be done.

1. Through perjury.

God spoke a word to the people of Israel that expanded upon this commandment in the Levitical Code. He declared, "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane

the name of your God" (Leviticus 19:12). This comes under the category of perjury in our day.

You understand that when people perjure themselves they bear witness to something that they know to be untrue. In the Old Testament as is customary in our society such oaths were sworn on the basis of God. We declare "so help me God." For a person to raise their right hand and then to give something that is not the truth on the witness stand is to misuse the name of the Lord. This is not only a sin against the civil order in which we live; it is a serious offense against holy God Himself.

We have had an example of this kind of misuse of God's name on the part of no one less than the president of the United States during this administration. Even though many in our society were offended at our president's moral transgressions, we should have been more offended that he broke this most sacred commandment - he perjured himself. In order to cover up things he had done he knowingly swore under oath to things that he knew were less than the truth. While the sin of adultery is a serious sin, the sin of perjury is more serious since it involves the name of the Lord. We need to be careful that we are not guilty of misusing his name.

2. Through profanity.

God also addressed this in Levitical Law. He told Moses to say to the Israelites, "If anyone curses his God, he will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death" (Leviticus 24:15-16). God actually made this statement when Moses had sought his face about a specific case. A young man who was a member of the tribes of Israel had been guilty of so misusing the name of the Lord. Actually, the young man was the product of a mixed marriage - his mother was a Israelite and his father was Egyptian. When a fight broke out in the camp between the young man and an Israelite, the young man blasphemed the name of the Lord with a curse. I am not sure what form this blasphemy may have taken, but it may have taken one of the forms that are popular in our day. It is a daily occurrence almost to hear someone using the name of God with the verb "damned." In so using the name of God, they are calling the damnation of God down upon a person or circumstances. It may have been that the young man used God's name in that way. Whatever the specific abuse was, God gave Moses the word that it was to be considered a capital crime and the young man would be put to death by stoning.

An angry man was using God's name freely as he vented his anger at a clerk in the department store. Almost every sentence contained a request for God to consign someone or something to perdition. Standing with the enraged man was his eleven

year old son who seemed unsurprised at such language. He was apparently accustomed to it. An older clerk walked over and asked, "Pardon me, sir, but do you always do your praying in public and so loudly?"

"Praying!" exclaimed the man with still another oath. "What are you talking about?"

"Whether you mean to or not," said the soft-spoken white haired man. "You have been uttering one blasphemous prayer after another, asking the Lord to destroy everything you don't like. My God is not in the damning business, and you are giving this young man the wrong idea about God; you are implying that God desires to condemn rather than to seek and save the lost." By that point, of course, practically everyone in the store was listening. With blushing apologies, the customer left. His misuse of God's name had been exposed for what it was - terrible blasphemy and a complete misrepresentation of the name of God.

We would all be wise to leave God's name out of our expressions of anger and our relations to things that we dislike. It is a terrible, terrible sin against God to bring His holy name into the expressions of such unholy emotions.

3. Through pretense.

All forms of pretense in the name of God are censored by this third commandment.

To use God's name to cover up an evil heart or to make oneself appear to be something one is not is therefore a violation.

You may remember the statement Jesus gave: "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me you evil doers!'" (Matthew 7:22-23). Jesus is speaking about people who will be condemned in the Day of Judgment because they pretended to be something they weren't. They misused the name of the Lord in preaching, exorcising demons, and reportedly even performing miracles. They did this while they had absolutely no knowledge of the Lord.

I had an interesting experience some time ago. It is not uncommon for me to receive phone calls or letters concerning some young man who is being considered by a congregation to be their pastor. I have given a number of young men the privilege of including my name on their resume. Often, Search Committees will call those men and women whose names are listed as references on such a resume.

In this case, I received a letter from a congregation in another state wanting my evaluation of a young man. They indicated in the letter that my name was on this young man's resume. As I looked at the name, I searched my mind to try to identify the young man. I finally concluded the young man was only a faint acquaintance. He was definitely not someone that I had given the privilege of using my name on his resume. He probably thought that this committee will never check with these names so I will just put some names of pastors of large churches on my resume. Unfortunately for him they did check and I had to report to the committee that I really had no personal knowledge of the young men. He had abused my name and it cost him. He had pretended to be something that he was not. He had presented himself to a committee as though I was his friend.

This is the kind of thing that this commandment is addressing. If you are going to use the name of the Lord, you better know the Lord. The claims that you make with reference to a relationship to Him better reflect reality. If he gets a call about you, and you have been using His name, and He has not given you permission to use his name, He will count that as a serious offense. His is a serious way of misusing the name of the Lord.

4. Through presumption.

Those who misuse or abuse the name of the Lord are many. As you study back across history and you find the things that have been done in the name of the Lord, you will hang your head in shame. Do you realize that in the history of our country people who were our kind of people - Baptist people, actually used the name of the Lord to justify the enslavement of a whole race of people? In my judgment that is a serious offense to so bring the name of the Lord into such an offensive practice.

However, do you not need to go back that far in history to find examples. There are some going on in our world tonight. In Northern Ireland, there are Catholics and Protestants who hate each other and seek to destroy each other in the name of the Lord. They will justify their ethnic and religious hatreds by using the name of God. We have those who have used the name of the Lord in Eastern Europe to justify ethnic cleansing projects of one kind or another. This is presumption.

Any time you seek to use the name of the Lord to justify some action or attitude that is inconsistent with the holy character of the Lord, you are guilty of a serious offense against the Lord Himself.

We need to be aware that the misuse of the name of the Lord is a terrible sin.

III. THE HONORING OF THE NAME OF THE LORD IS A BLESSING.

Not everything in scripture is about the abuse of the name of the Lord. We are admonished, particularly in the worship section of the Old Testament to honor the name of the Lord in various ways. Just to give you some counsel for the days ahead, let us consider some of these statements.

1. Through trust.

The Psalmist admonished us in the statement that we have already considered, "In Him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in His holy name"(Psalm 33:21). To trust in His holy name is to trust in the Lord. The best and finest use you can make of the name of the Lord is to trust in it. Trust in Him and you will find joy unspeakable and full of glory.

In another memorable statement concerning the name of the Lord, Solomon wrote in Proverbs, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are saved" (Proverbs 18:10). What a beautiful picture! The name of the Lord is a strong tower. If you can hide in the name of the Lord you are safe from all evil and harm. The righteous know this about the name of the Lord, so they run with haste to hide in the name of the Lord. Now, this is the way you honor the name of the Lord - you trust in it.

2. Through praise.

The Psalmist leaves us an unforgettable admonition in these words: "Let the name of the Lord be praised, both now and forever more. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised" (Psalm 113:2-3).

What a word of encouragement. And then in another Psalm he says, "Let them praise the name of the Lord for His name alone is exalted; His splendor is above the earth and the heavens" (Psalm 148:13). Do you want to honor the name of the Lord? Then praise His name. To praise His name is to praise the Lord. His name is a reflection of who he is. All around this planet there should be men and women young and old, lifting their voices in harmony and declaring the greatness and the glory and the goodness of His name.

3. Through love.

The Psalmist gives us one other indication about how we can honor His name:

"But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you" (Psalm 5:11). "Love your name" - this mean that you love Him.

Did you ever stand to the side and hear someone misuse the name of someone you loved? Do you remember the pain that you felt as you heard their name maligned and misused? Do you remember that inclination to speak up and to speak a good word for them? Did you speak up? Do you remember the shame that you felt when you failed to speak up and defend the name of a friend? Should we not feel that same shame if we allow someone in our presence to misuse the name of the Lord and we never utter a word? The depth of our offense toward someone who is misusing his name will be the depth of our love for His name. I can't imagine standing aside and allowing someone to speak blasphemously concerning my mother or my precious wife and never rising up to say anything. Can you? Well, my Savior, my God, has loved me more and done for me more than these two precious women to which I have referred. My debt to him is an eternal debt. Surely, I will want to honor His name by loving Him.

Our culture will not censor you if you misuse the name of the Lord. What happened in Michigan is not a foretaste of things to come. That is just one little isolated incident of someone who got upset when the name of the Lord was misused. Most of our culture will laugh with you if you misuse the name of the Lord. But those of us who know Him and reverence Him and love Him and trust Him cannot be a party to misuse of the name of the Lord.

