

GOD'S TOP TEN – THE TEN COMMANDMENTS TODAY!

#3. DON'T MISUSE GOD'S NAME or "There's Something About that Name"

Exodus 20:7: Exodus 3:13-15:

This is week eight in our series *"God's Top Ten"* where we're looking at the Ten Commandments. The commandments are now over 3,500 years old so we're asking the simple question, are the commandments still relevant today? Because we've been looking at them in reverse order, today we come to the third commandment, the one that gets broken a lot. Exodus 20:7 (NIV), ***"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."*** The Message translation puts it this way, ***"No using the name of God, your God, in curses or silly banter; God won't put up with the irreverent use of his name."***

This commandment is about taking God's Name seriously. Now why is that a big deal? Think about your own name for a moment. It's important to you, isn't it? You want people to pronounce it properly. To spell it correctly. You cringe when someone calls you the wrong name. You feel hurt when someone forgets your name. You hate it when people make fun of your name. Why? It's because in many ways, our name represents who we are. That's why slandering someone's name, or stealing someone's identity, are treated as serious offences under the law. Well God is defensive of his name as well.

The reason we're so protective of our names is because they represent something. My full name is ***Alexander Robert Neal Mathers***. In my family, for generations, the eldest son in each generation has been named Alexander Robert. But when I was born my grandfather *Alexander Robert Mathers*, and his oldest son, my uncle, *Alexander Robert Mathers* were both still living. To complicate matters more I was a twin, so I was given the family name *Alexander Robert*, and also a third name to be my given name *Neal*. But even *Neal* was chosen because it had significance. In Gaelic it means *"chief among men"*, hinting to my future, which is now a reality, that I would be the head of our family clan one day. As neither I, nor my brothers, had any male children, the name *Alexander Robert Mathers* in our family will end with me. There's something kind of sad about that, because there has been an *Alexander Robert* in every generation of our family since at least 1790. So the bottom line is, don't mess with my name. I will become extremely defensive.

Listen to what Proverbs 22:1 says about the importance, not just of a name, but of a good name. ***"A good name is more desirable than great riches: to be esteemed is better than silver or gold"***. So if our names are so important to us, it shouldn't really surprise us that God's name is important to him, and he doesn't want it misused or taken in vain. In fact, he guards his name so jealously that this third commandment actually says that he will punish those who misuse it.

Now why is that? It's because God's Name is the absolute name that demands honour. It is, as the old hymn goes, the Name above all Names. God's name reflects his character. His name

guarantees his promises. His name ultimately earns our salvation. Author Philip Yancy in his book *“The Bible Jesus Read”* suggests that his third commandment means, **“Always live in awareness of God’s existence”**. Now if we do that, if we always live in awareness of God’s existence, how can we take his name lightly? How can we use it as a swear word? Or in such a way that we forget the character of the Person who stands behind the name?

There’s a story about C.R. Smith, who was one of the founders of American Airlines. One day Smith was flying and he made a stop-over in Nashville, Tennessee. He went to visit the two desks that American Airlines had at the airport terminal in those days. At one desk the phone was ringing, and at the other desk an employee was sitting with his feet on the desk reading a newspaper. Smith said to him, *“Your phone is ringing.”* *“That’s reservations, I’m maintenance,”* said the man. Absolutely furious with that response, Smith picked up the phone and began talking to a person who needed to get to California urgently. Smith rattled off the schedule from memory and hung up. The man from maintenance was impressed. *“That was pretty good,”* he said, *“Do you work for American.”* *“Yes, I do,”* Smith answered, *“And you used to”*. You see C.R. Smith knew that a name is important, but he also knew that what stands behind that name, in this case customer service, is equally important and demands equal respect.

God’s Name demands respect because His Name represents who he is, and what he does. Psalm 111:9c-10 (NIV) says this, **“Holy and awesome is his name....To him belongs eternal praise.”** I think it’s fair to say, that we don’t take God’s name, or His character, as seriously as people did in the past. And I’m not just talking about the world here, folks, I’m talking about us as Christians as well. We trivialize God’s Name. We use it as a swear words, or as a careless expression. But perhaps most of all a lot of people say that they believe in God, but they take his name in vain by not living as though they do.

There’s a story about a soldier in the army of Alexander the Great. He didn’t have the character, courage or commitment that Alexander expected of his soldiers so one day he called the man to appear before him. The soldier stood there, poorly dressed, shoulders slouched, not showing any real respect to the King in whose presence he stood. *“What’s your name?”* demanded Alexander. *“My name is Alexander, same as yours”,* came the mumbled reply. *“Change your name”,* replied Alexander the Great, *“or change your ways”*. Alexander understood the importance of a name, and the importance of living by that name. Makes you think about the name we bear, doesn’t it? Christ-ian. Are we living up to that name, or do we need to change our ways!

The Jewish people understood how important God’s name is. Do you remember the Scripture lesson we read earlier, when God revealed his name to Moses? God is sending Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt. So Moses says to God, **“If they want to know your name what shall I tell them?”** **14 God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”** **15 God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of**

Jacob—has sent me to you.’ “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation. (Exodus 3:13-15 (NIV):

“I AM”, is a revealed Name. Now think about that. Every other name on earth is a given name. My name. Your name. The names of plants, and animals, and planets. Only one person has never been given a name. God. We would not even know His name unless he had revealed it to us. That alone makes God’s Name holy or different. In fact, the Jewish people believe that God’s name is so holy that it should never be spoken, and so it simply became translated as THE LORD, and that’s how it appears over 6,800 times in our English Bible translations. But each time you read THE LORD in the Scriptures, it is referring back to that great mysterious name revealed by long ago, “I AM WHO I AM”.

Now what does “I AM WHO I AM” mean? That, of course, is part of the mystery surrounding God, but a rough translation would be “I am the Living One” or “I am the One who will be whom I will be’. Both convey the idea that God is independent of everything else that exists. That He cannot be contained, or restrained. That He is truth, that he is just, that he is trustworthy. That when he makes up his mind to do something, he will. That when he makes a promise, he will keep it. Now that doesn’t mean that God is an impersonal force, or a philosophical idea. His very name begins with the pronounce “I”. *I am who I am*. The rest of the Bible spells out who He is, by using such names as Creator, Saviour, Redeemer, Leader, Protector, Healer, Helper, Spirit, Judge and Comforter.

In fact, we’re not even really sure what the name of God originally sounded like, that’s lost to us, although our ancestors thought it sounded like the word *JEHOVAH*, although most bible scholars today think the Hebrew syllables sounded out as *YAHWEH*. But again most English translations simply translate the divine name as *THE LORD*.

Now here’s an amazing thing. It is through Jesus that God invite us to be on first name basis with him. According to Matthew 1:21 the name Jesus means, “*The Lord saves*”. When we use the name Jesus we are affirmed God’s Name as “The Lord”. But Jesus is also revealed to us in Matthew 1:23 as “*Immanuel*”, which means “*God with us*”. Jesus was, as one biblical commentator has put it, “*God with skin on.*” That’s why Christianity is not about a “*creed*”, or a “*religion*”. It is about a relationship with our God. And it was Jesus who taught us in The Lord’s Prayer to call God “**Abba**” or “**Father.**” Abba, properly translated, is not a formal term as such. It best translates as “*Daddy*”. It’s a word that reminds us that we can have an intimate relationship with God, as well as the confidence that we can approach God as his children.

But I think we must be very careful here. Jesus never dumbed down the holiness or majesty of God. He is “***Our Father in heaven.***” We are to pray, “***Hallowed (or holy) is your name***”. We are to pray, “***Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven***”. Jesus strikes the perfect balance between an intimate, personal relationship with God, along with a deep respect for the nature, character, and Name of God. So must we.

Now let's go back to that great name **I AM WHO I AM**. Have you ever wondered why Jesus got the religious leaders of his day so upset that they opposed him, and eventually plotted to kill him? It was because of the way he used that divine name! ***"I AM the resurrection and the life. I AM, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I AM, the light of the world. I AM the Good Shepherd. I AM the true Vine. I AM the Bread of Life."*** (John 11:25, 14:6, 8:12, 10:11, 15:1, 6:35). It was very clear to them that by using "I AM", Jesus was claiming to be God, and in Jewish society, with its absolute respect for God's Name, that was a capital offence. So that's the third commandment. ***"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."***

O.K. Here is the issue. If we believe God is the Creator of all that is. If we believe that in Jesus Christ he has saved us from our sin, and reconciled us to himself. If we believe His Holy Spirit is resident within us. If we believe in eternal life, and that one day we will stand before God to be judged. If we believe that the name "Christian" is a name that comes with privileges and responsibilities. Then we must do everything we can not to make God out to be meaningless, insignificant or marginal. We must not use his Name as a swearword. We must not swear falsely by His Name. We must not bear false witness. We must not say "I believe" with one breath, and then go out and live in such a way that dishonours his name. That's why this commandment is still relevant in the 21st century because how we treat God's Name is evidence of what we believe about him.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, our Lord,
as the Psalmist proclaimed in Psalm 8,
"How majestic is your Name in all the earth."
Help us always to honor your name.

We thank you that as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we bear the Name "Christian".
May our words and actions bring honour to His Name.

We thank you that your Holy Spirit
draws us into the family of God,
where our Father in heaven knows us all by name.

We pray for those who are persecuted because they bear the name of Jesus;
for those who are called names that are hurtful and offensive;
for those who have names, but who are made to feel invisible to others, or who are
marginalized by them, and treated as "nobodies".

We pray for those who have diseases like Alzheimer's and Dementia, and who have trouble
remembering their own names, and the names of others.

Lord, hear our prayers for all of those who have named. We bring them before you in the
Name of Jesus. Amen.