

GOD IS NOT A FOUR-LETTER WORD

Scriptures: Matthew 7:21-23; Leviticus 19:11-12

The most misunderstood of the Ten Commandments is the third: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” Growing up I was told that this commandment had to do with swearing. Don’t use God’s name as a curse, like when you hit your thumb with a hammer. But actually, that misses the point the point of the commandment, sort of like hitting your thumb with a hammer—it misses the point. The third commandment is not really about swearing at all, at least not the four-letter kind.

The key to this commandment is the phrase “in vain.” To do something in vain means to do something that is wasted or pointless, like trying getting to get my dog and cat to get along with each other, like trying to get a 2 year-old to share or 14 year-old to pick up his room. It is wasted effort. It is trying to do something in vain. Taking the Lord’s name in vain has a similar meaning. It means to use the Lord’s name in a way that is empty or worthless.

I am sure you have seen courtroom dramas where a witness takes the stand and says, “I solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help me God.” If a witness swears that oath and then lies, he or she has taken God’s name in vain. Their promise in God’s name turns out to be worthless.

That is the first meaning of this commandment. In Leviticus 19:12, God says, “And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.” You see, this commandment is about swearing but not the four-letter kind. It is about profaning God’s name by breaking your promises. If you promise in God’s name to tell the truth, or to be faithful to be to your spouse until death do you part, or, as in the service for new members, “to be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his word, showing his love, and participating actively in the worship and mission of Christ’s church”—if you make such a promise in God’s name and fail to keep it, you have taken the name of the Lord in vain.

That is the first meaning of this commandment, but there is more. In January, 2006, Pat Robertson, the former host of a conservative Christian television program called “The 700 Club,” commented on a devastating stroke that crippled and almost killed former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He said on the program that God “smote” Ariel Sharon with a stroke to punish him for withdrawing Israeli troops from the Gaza strip. With all due respect, that, to me, is a case of using God’s name in vain—using God’s name in a way that has nothing to do with God, that in fact profanes God’s name. First he implies that God opposes Israel sharing its land with their Palestinian neighbors, something that God commands even Moses to do in certain cases. Worse, he suggests that a stroke is a sign of God’s judgment on a person’s sin. If that were the case, we would all be in rehab right now.

In explaining this commandment Martin Luther says, “It is a misuse of God’s name if we call upon the Lord God in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind” (The Large Catechism). I think that especially includes everyone who uses God’s name to justify their own distorted religious or political views.

I have mentioned before a book by Christopher Hitchens called *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Early in the book he tells this story:

In Belfast, I have seen whole streets burned out by sectarian warfare between different sects of Christianity, and interviewed people whose relatives and friends have been kidnapped and killed or tortured by rival religious death squads, often for no other reason than membership of another confession. There is an old Belfast joke about the man stopped at a roadblock and asked his religion. When he replies that he is an atheist he is asked, “Protestant or Catholic atheist?” (p. 18).

Christopher Hitchens uses this story as an argument against believing in God, but I see it as an illustration of taking the name of the Lord in vain. When people use the name of God to justify torturing or killing their neighbors, they are defiling God’s name, much worse than if they used God’s name when they hit their thumb with a hammer. When people use the name of God to justify bombing an abortion clinic or flying an airplane into the World Trade Center or burning witches at the stake or massacring a Muslim village during a crusade, they are taking the name of the Lord in vain. They are polluting God’s holy name with something that has nothing to do with God.

That is the extreme form of what Jesus described in our second scripture lesson. In Matthew 7, part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” In other words, if we use the Lord’s name to justify actions that the Lord opposes, we use the Lord’s name in vain. We use it for no good or worthwhile purpose.

Now here is where we all need to be careful. This week I read a book by Stephen Carter called *God’s Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*. I thought it might be relevant to this week’s sermon. And it was. Early in the book he writes,

In truth, there is probably no country in the Western world where people use God’s name quite as much, or quite as publicly, or for quite as many purposes, as we Americans do—the Third Commandment notwithstanding. Few candidates for office are able to end their speeches without asking God to bless their audience, or the nation, or the great work we are undertaking, but everybody is sure that the other side is insincere. ... Athletes thank God, often on television, after scoring the winning touchdown, because like politicians, they like to think God is on their side. ... Everybody who wants to change America, and everybody who wants not to, understands the nation’s love affair with God’s name, which is why everybody invokes it (pp. 12-13).

Interestingly, Carter does not say we should quit using God’s name in public, anymore than Jesus tells us to quit saying, “Lord, Lord.” It is not the use of God’s name that is the problem; it is the misuse of God’s name, claiming God’s name for things that have nothing to do with God.

This is especially true when God’s name is invoked to justify using political or military power against others. Stephen Carter says,

If history has taught us anything, it is that religions that fall too deeply in love with the art of politics lose their souls—very fast. Look at the medieval Catholic Church, with its desperate and impossible ideal of building a “total society,” in return for which it approved all manner of misconduct by emperors and princes. Look at the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Iran. Look at any nation where religious leaders, having touched the levers of power, have refused to let them go; and so have become, not religious but political” (p. 19).

I should acknowledge here that the same could be said for some of our Protestant forbearers who used the power of the state to burn at the stake people for not agreeing with their doctrines. That is taking the name of the Lord in vain.

Two weeks ago I quoted Martin Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments on an insert in the bulletin. Martin Luther, as I explained, gives each of the Ten Commandments a positive spin. He not only talks about what they forbid us to do; he notes what they command us to do. Here is Martin Luther’s explanation of today’s commandment:

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” What does this mean?
Answer: We should fear and love God, and so we should not use his name to curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive, but in every time of need call upon him, pray to him, praise him, and give him thanks (*The Small Catechism*).

The opposite of taking God’s name in vain is to use God’s name in prayer and worship.

During the civil war, Abraham Lincoln was asked if God was on the side of the Union. He replied, “I am less concerned whether God is on our side than whether we are on God’s side.” That is the right way to use God’s name: not to claim God for our own political or personal agenda but to ask God to claim us for God’s agenda. The right way to use God’s name is not to justify ourselves but to beg for God’s grace and mercy. When we lift up God’s name for that purpose, it will never be lifted up in vain.

- Ken Onstot
October 23, 2007