

THE NAME

Exodus 20:7

Fourth Wednesday in Lent

March 23, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson is from Exodus, chapter 20, verse 7. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Exodus 20, verse 7, we read in Jesus' name.

⁷“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a negative side and a positive side to every commandment. And by “negative and positive,” I don't mean that part of it is bad and part of it is good. Every command of God is purely good. There is nothing bad about any of the commandments. Rather, what I mean is that every commandment teaches both what we should not do and what we should do. Another way of saying it is that every commandment reveals the distinction between good and evil.

Most of the commandments are written in a negative format. That is, they tell us what not to do. For example, the First Commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” That's a negative format. It tells us what not to do. Worshipping other gods is evil. Fearing, loving, or trusting in something else above the one true God is harmful to us and has negative consequences. That's all in the negative side of the command.

But there is also a positive side of every commandment. Using the First Commandment again as an example, it's this: You shall have the one true God. You shall worship him only. “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” That's the positive side. And it's related to the negative side. The prohibition on the negative side protects the good gift on the positive side. Every commandment does this. By forbidding the bad, every commandment protects some good gift God has given to us. And with the First Commandment, the gift it protects is God himself. And I don't mean that God needs protecting. He is not injured when we disobey the First Commandment. Instead, I mean that the First Commandment protects the gift of himself to. It protects his place in our lives. It ensures that we would continue to possess this gift and benefit from it. In this way, every commandment is for our good. The commandments are a protective fence around the good gifts God gives to us. We are injured when we disobey the commandments.

I know we've already talked about this the last couple of weeks, but it's important to review, because our sinful natures despise God's commandments. The devil tempts us to think that God oppresses us with his commandments, like he is withholding something good from us. This was the nature of the very first temptation, when the devil said, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5). If temptations looked bad, we wouldn't have much of a problem with them. If we could clearly see the pain and destruction that evil causes, they would not be so tempting. But temptations look good. They appear to be enjoyable. So we often feel like God is withholding something good from us. Temptations lie to us. That's why it's so important for us

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to recognize that every commandment is given to us for our good. And they protect God's good gifts to us.

So that's the negative and positive side of the commandments. The negative side includes what we should not do. The positive side includes what we should do. The negative side includes the consequences or punishments for violating the commandments. The positive side includes the good gifts that are protected by the commandments.

Martin Luther's Small Catechism is brilliant in this regard. With most of the commandments, he explains both the negative and the positive side. There are only two exceptions. With the First and Sixth Commandments, he only lists the positive side. With the First Commandment, I suppose it's because he quickly and simply gets to the point: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And the negative side is so obvious that it doesn't need to be stated. With the other nine commandments, the only one where he doesn't list the negative side is the Sixth Commandment, and experienced minds can figure why. But with all the others, he lists the negative side, followed by the positive side.

So let's look for the negative and the positive sides of the Second Commandment. The commandment itself, as the LORD gave it to the people of Israel is like this: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Ex.20:7). And the format of that is completely negative. It says what we should not do: take the name of the LORD in vain. And it states the consequence: the LORD will not hold us guiltless. That is, he will hold us guilty. We will remain guilty. That's all negative.

Now for Luther's explanation. He asks, "What does this mean?" And he begins every explanation except the first one the exact same way: "We should fear and love God." Then he lists the negative: "... so that we do not curse, swear, conjure, lie, or deceive by His Name." That's the negative side, and we'll explore that more in a little while. But then Luther explains the positive side: "... but call upon Him in every time of need and worship Him with prayer, praise, and thanksgiving." That's the positive side. That's what we should do. We should use God's name to call upon him and worship him.

The positive side also reveals the gift protected by the commandments. Maybe you've figured it out already. If you haven't, I think you'll recognize it when you hear it, and you'll see a little more clearly how this prohibit and protect thing works. The gift that the Second Commandment protects is the Name of God. God has given his Name to us, and Luther's explanation helps us understand how this is a gift to us. The gift of God's Name to us means that we have access to God. He has revealed to us who he is. That's what it means that he has given his Name to us. He has revealed his identity to us as our Father; our Savior Jesus Christ; and our comforter, counselor, and teacher, the Holy Spirit. So we use his Name to call upon him in prayer. His Name is a gift to us.

So what does it mean to take God's Name in vain? The common example is when we say, "Oh my God," without really thinking or when we drop something on our foot, and we use the name of our Savior as an expletive. These are sins that should be avoided. We should also probably avoid the use of "OMG," "Jeepers creepers," and "Jiminy Crickets," because they're all derivatives of taking the Lord's Name in vain. And, by the way, just a little tip: if you ever hear the words "Oh my God" or "Jesus Christ" come out of your mouth in vain, just use that as the start of a prayer, and turn your vain use into an honorable use. That might help to not only break a bad habit, but also start a good one.

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I saw this one time. I thought it was pretty clever. I was at a Bible camp with a high ropes course. It's like an obstacle course, except on platforms twenty-five feet in the air. The participants are harnessed to the course, so they're completely safe, but they still freak out. So there was a teenage girl who said what teenage girls say in such circumstances: "Oh my God." And the camp director was there, and he said to her, "Keep going." She was confused. She said, "What?" He said, "You started praying. That's good. Now finish your prayer."

These are the vain or meaningless uses of God's Name. We might just utter the words in a flippant way without really thinking about it. And that's probably what we think of first regarding the Second Commandment. And while these flippant utterances are a violation of the commandment, there is a far more serious violation of the Second Commandment: false doctrine. And false doctrine is far more serious, because it poses a greater threat to the gift of God's Name.

When we talk about God's Name, we're not just talking about the letters J-E-S-U-S, or G-O-D, or L-O-R-D, or even the Hebrew letters *yod-heh-vav-heh*, which spells "Yahweh." We're talking about the complete revelation of who God is. That's what we mean by his Name. It's his identity. We speak this way about other humans too. When we speak of having "a good name," we usually don't mean that the name Philip is superior to Thomas. Rather, we mean that the person has a good reputation. What is known about the person is positive. That's what it means to have "a good name," and that's the way we're speaking of God's Name. His Name is everything that is known about him. It's what he has revealed about himself to us. And false doctrine is always some kind of perversion of the truth concerning God. Whenever we say something about God that is not true, we pervert the revelation of God's Name, that is, his identity, and we break the Second Commandment. To say something, anything, about God that is not true is to use his Name in vain.

For example, and I'm going to pick a really far-out example, because I don't want anyone to believe this, if I were to teach that God is a rainbow unicorn who showers us with Skittles, that would be false doctrine. And it wouldn't be harmless. Hopefully it's silly enough that no one would actually believe it. But if, by chance, someone did believe that heresy, it would rob them of God's true identity. So instead of calling upon the true God for the good things he has promised, they would call upon some imaginary unicorn for candy. That would be awful, because it wouldn't work. Not only would they not get candy, but, more importantly, they would not receive the good things God promises to give to those who call upon his Name: forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation.

So you can see how the Second Commandment applies especially to preachers and teachers. It applies to all of God's people, but especially to preachers and teachers. And this includes parents, because they are pastors and teachers in their homes. All who have been given the vocation of making God's Name known to someone else must be extremely diligent to use God's Name truthfully and not in vain, because, while this commandment can be violated intentionally, it is more often violated by simple negligence when we speak things about God that are mere opinion instead of what he has revealed in Scripture.

So it's not harmless to accidentally say things about God that are not true. Jesus said, **"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea"** (Mark 9:42). The word Jesus uses there that gets translated as "sin," isn't the simple word for sin. Jesus isn't talking about causing a child to commit one individual sin. It's a special word. It means to scandalize. It means to cause someone to fall into unbelief. Listen again to how serious Jesus'

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warning is: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to *fall into unbelief*, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

That’s the gravity of the Second Commandment, and especially in the sense of speaking false doctrine against the Name of God. So I think this helps us see why the Second Commandment is the Second Commandment, and not the fifth, seventh, or tenth. Last week I said that, in most lists of rules, rule number one is the most important. And that’s certainly true of the Ten Commandments. The First Commandment is the most important. But there also seems to be a priority to the Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth. Now this should not diminish the importance of the later commandments. They are still just as serious as you think they are, if not more so. But there’s a gravity to the Second Commandment that exceeds all of those that follow. And if we haven’t thought of the Second Commandment in this way before, it might surprise us.

Think of it this way. Which sin causes more damage: using the LORD’s Name in vain or murder? If, by using the LORD’s Name in vain, we simply mean saying, “OMG” or “Jesus Christ,” then it seems like a silly question. And it’s hard to see why one of them is number two and the other is number five. But what is the consequence of each? What is the consequence of firing a bullet or thrusting a knife into another person? And I don’t mean the consequence for you. This isn’t really about you. What is the consequence to that person? Well, pretty big, especially if they die. And I don’t want to diminish that. If anything, God would have us take other people’s physical lives more seriously than we actually do. But what is the consequence of teaching false doctrine to a person, so that the Name of God is profaned and they stumble into unbelief. The consequence is actually greater than the destruction of their body. It’s eternal destruction, what we call “hell.” That’s the gravity of the Second Commandment.

That’s the negative side of the Second Commandment, and it’s pretty heavy. But the positive side of the commandments is always heavier, because the positive side is where we see the gifts. It is imperative to believe and teach rightly about God so that his Name might be known and praised and called upon. His Name is a great gift he has given to us, so that we might call upon it and be saved. And this is why we’re so obsessed with correct doctrine. Correct doctrine makes known the truth of God, so that we might call upon the true God and be saved. “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ ” (Rom. 10:13). That’s really the point. And that is God’s good and gracious will. That’s why God has given us his Name.

In the Holy Scriptures, he has revealed his Name. And it’s not just the letters in his name. If that were the case, he would have said, “You shall not take the *names* of the LORD your God in vain,” because he has many names that we can refer to him by. But the Name, with a capital “N” is the complete revelation of who he is and what he has done for us. It is the complete revelation of the Holy Trinity, and everything that the three persons of the Trinity have done to create us, redeem us, and preserve us in the true faith.

And the revelation of God is centered on Jesus Christ. No one knows God apart from Jesus. You cannot know the Father, and you cannot know the Holy Spirit apart from the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus taught this to his disciples on the evening before his crucifixion. He said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Apart from the Son, no one really knows the Father or the Holy Spirit. You can know something *about* God by observing the world, its beauty and its power. But you can only *know* God through Jesus Christ.

And in Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself as our Savior. In Jesus Christ, we see that God did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world. He did not come to put us to death,

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but he came to be put to death for our sake. The Name of God, more than anything else, is the actual event of Jesus on the cross. That's the Name of God. That's his reputation. That's how he has revealed himself to us. Far more than the letters in the different names and titles the Bible gives to him, God's Name is the dead Son of God on the cross. That's Jesus. He is the crucified and risen Son of God. That's how God has chosen to reveal himself, so that's his Name.

And so we know where to look for salvation. We know who to call upon. For any and every sin, including our sins against God's Name, God invites us to call upon his Name for forgiveness and salvation. As a pastor, the Second Commandment terrifies me. Remember what I said about the gravity of profaning the Name of God. If such is the case, it's unlikely that any pastor or teacher can be saved. And, actually, the same thing holds true for parents. And for all of us, there are sins that just damn us. But God bound himself to this promise concerning his Name: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." There are no conditions in that promise. You can hold God to that promise. He wants you to. You can pin God down on this. You can name all of your sins. You can admit that you did most of them on purpose. You can even admit that you don't feel nearly as bad as you should. And you can say, "You promised to forgive me." God has bound himself to that promise, and he wants you to hold him to it. This is exactly why he has revealed his Name. So that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.