

***Be Careful How You Worship;
Be Careful How You Use God's Name
Exodus 20:4-7***

The humorist Mark Twain once encountered a businessman from Boston who said to him, "Before I die, I will go to the Holy Land and when I get there I'm going to climb Mt. Sinai. And from the top I will shout each of the Ten Commandments at the top of my voice." Unimpressed, Twain responded, "I've got a better idea. Stay in Boston, and obey the Ten Commandments!"

It's a lot easier to recite them than it is to live them, isn't it? God gave his moral law that his people might know how it is they are to live. How do you live in a way that pleases God? Obey his word. Do you want a life that works according to how it's supposed to work? Follow God's word.

God is giving Israel a glimpse of his character as revealed in his moral law. "You are my people whom I have redeemed, so live like a redeemed people.

Last week we considered the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." God wants a relationship with us that is an exclusive relationship. "Don't worship substitutes for me or add anything to me."

Today we are looking at the second and third commandments. Turn in your Bible to the book of Exodus, chapter 20.

Exodus 20:4-6

I. Be Careful How You Worship

A. Meaning of the Commandment

God already said, "Have no other gods before me." No idols; nothing that takes the place of God in your life. This second commandment isn't just a repetition of the first commandment. So what is it about? Theologian Charles Hodge wrote:

Idolatry consists not only in the worship of false gods, but also in the worship of the true God by images.

God's requirement: Don't make any images of me and bow down to worship them. Why are we prone to violate this commandment?

God is an invisible God. We are asked to trust a God we cannot see. Our tendency is to fashion something we can see, something with an element of tangibility.

So I think we have to say that statues are out – images of God made for some type of representation. We need to be concerned possibly with pictures of Jesus. Have you ever wondered who took the snapshot of Jesus? Where do those pictures come from? – from the imaginations of someone’s mind. No one knows what Jesus really looked like. There is no record, no account. We know he was Semitic and would have had those characteristics, but beyond that, we can only guess.

Ever notice how the face of Jesus has changed over time to fit the mindset of the day? The Jesus of my growing up years was captured by pictures of Jesus with long, flowing, silky smooth hair, halo in the background.

Then in the 60’s and 70’s, we see Jesus with kind of a wild look – like Charles Manson or the rugged individualist: the “Marlboro man.”

Then the movies came along and God is wearing tennis shoes, thick glasses, a toupee, smoking a cigar. He’s everybody’s likeable buddy – “Oh God” – aka George Burns. Or he is Morgan Freeman in Bruce Almighty.

It is projecting one’s mindset upon God. God says, “Don’t do that.” What’s the point of this emphatic warning? From the emphasis given to the commandment itself, and with the frightening consequences attached to it, we should suppose that this must be a matter of crucial importance. Here’s some reasons why.

B. Reasons for the Commandment

1) Images obscure God’s glory

“A true image of God,” wrote John Calvin in the 16th century, “is not to be found in all the world; and hence His glory is defiled, and His truth corrupted by the lie, whenever He is set before our eyes in a visible form. Therefore, to devise any image of God itself is impious; because of this corruption His majesty is adulterated, and He is figured to be other than He is.”

We have to acknowledge from the outset that God is not like anything; that is, he is not exactly like anything or anybody. A.W.Tozer, in his book *Knowledge of the Holy*, writes:

When we try to imagine what God is like we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our mind to work on; hence, whatever we visualize God to

be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made, and what He has made is not God.

The point is that we end up with an image left to our imagination, our interpretation. It is impossible to come up with anything to accurately represent God. How can anything totally and completely represent the awesome majesty, totality, and transcendency of God? It cannot be done.

2) Images mislead us; they convey false ideas about God.

The very inadequacy with which they represent God perverts our thoughts of him and plants in our minds errors of all sorts about his character. Images will falsify the truth of God in your mind.

Psychologically, if you focus your thoughts habitually on an image or picture of the one to whom you are going to pray, you will come to think of God, and pray to God, as the image represents him. In other words, the object can become that which is worshiped. To the extent the image fails to tell the whole truth about God, to that extent you will fail to worship God in truth.

In John's Gospel, chapter three, Jesus is recorded having a conversation with Nicodemus, a religious leader. He reaches back into the Old Testament with a reference which he then applied to himself. Listen to what he said:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. – *John 3:14-15*

The story is told in the Old Testament book of Numbers. The people are grumbling and complaining about God's treatment. In judgment, God sent serpents among the people. Those who were bitten died. The people wised up real quick, went to Moses and confessed their sin against God, asking him to intercede with God on their behalf.

God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole. If people looked upon it with faith, God would preserve their lives. This was an instrument of salvation, of deliverance, for the people.

Ever wonder what happened to the bronze serpent? The Israelites began to worship it. It assumed greater and greater significance. This went on until 700 years later when King Hezekiah came to the throne and began to battle the Israelites' paganism and idolatry.

(Hezekiah) removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it. – *II Kings 18:4*

A good thing, a God-given thing, a God-ordained thing, had become an idol that was worshiped. Here's another reason for the commandment:

3) Images attempt to reduce God to manageable terms.

We want to get a handle on God, to figure him out. We want to get him where we can use him, or at least know where he is when we need him. We localize God; we limit him.

How often do you hear someone say something like this: "I just like to think of God as (you fill in the blank.). Or, "I don't like to think of God as a judge; I like to think of him simply as a loving father."

J.I. Packer notes: "We know from experience how often remarks of this kind serve as a prelude to a denial of something that the Bible tells us about God."

We are bound to manipulate God as we think of him as nothing but a super human. God is manageable when confined to the limits of our mind.

J.B. Phillips, in his book *Your God is Too Small*, writes:

Man may be made in the image of God, but it is not sufficient to conceive God as nothing more than an infinitely magnified man. All lofty concepts of the greatness of God need to be carefully watched lest they turn out to be mere magnifications of certain human characteristics.

What's wrong with an idol? An idol localizes – puts God in one spot. Idols externalize – suggesting that what you see is God. An idol materializes – it presents a given likeness at a given moment in time as far as my understanding goes. Idols trivialize God – reducing him to a manageable size and concept.

So, what should our response be to this commandment?

C. Responses to the Commandment

1) Negatively, this commandment is warning against ways of worship and religious practice that lead us to dishonor God and to falsify his truth.

Positively, it summons us to recognize that God the Creator is transcendent, mysterious and inscrutable, beyond the range of any imagining or philosophical guesswork of which we are capable.

It calls us to humble ourselves before him, to listen and learn from him, to let him teach us what he is like and how we should think of him. How do we get a clear picture of God, an undistorted understanding of who God is and what he is like?

(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. – *Colossians 1:15, 19; 2:9*

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. – *John 1:18*

Jesus Christ accurately reveals the character and nature of God. God is not the God of imagination, but the God of revelation. He has shown us in the God-man what he is really like.

2) The commandment calls us to greater faith living.

We walk by faith, not by sight. That's the call to faith and obedience in the New Testament, as it was the call to the Israelite in the Old. God did not show the people a visible symbol of himself, but he spoke of them. Therefore, they were not to seek visible images of God, but simply obey his word.

Don't create images, mental or physical, but trust the invisible God. Stake your life on a God you cannot see, but who has revealed himself perfectly in his Son, Jesus. Build your knowledge of God through the revelation of his word.

Now, let's look at the third commandment.

II. Be Careful How You Use God's Name

Exodus 20:7 – “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.”

This third commandment follows numbers one and two very naturally. Number one says, “Have no other gods; worship me exclusively.” Number two says, “Worship me spiritually, without images – physical or mental.” Number three says, “Worshiping God means not using God's name in a false or empty way.”

A. Meaning of the Commandment

Two key words:

- “Take” – means to lift up, or to bear, to carry, to use.
- “Vain” – emptiness, nothingness, vanity, void

So, literally, the command is: “You shall not lift up, carry, use, take up the name of the Lord your God to emptiness, vanity, insincerity, meaninglessness.” In other words, “Don’t treat my name lightly.”

So what kinds of things fall under this commandment?

1) Perjury – swearing falsely; lying

Don’t swear by a lying oath. One problem in early human history was lying so frequent that no one could trust another’s ordinary word. In order to be believed, one had to call upon God to witness to the truth. “As God is my witness....” “As surely as God lives....”

The oath brought God into the equation – swearing by God’s name even though you knew deep down it just wasn’t so – no intention of honoring the oath. It became a way of confusing other people, particularly the Gentiles who didn’t know what was going on.

Today, it might be expressed this way: “You can trust me. I’m a Christian.” And yet there is little intention of honoring that commitment. When you hear that line, you better turn and run the other way.

God is concerned about lying. Proverbs 12:22 says: “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD.”

Of course, we can become pretty sophisticated about stretching the truth: A woman of great wealth authorized a book about her genealogy. During the research, the author engaged for the assignment discovered that one of her grandfathers had been electrocuted in Sing Sing. He insisted that he would not delete this information from the book, though the woman pleaded for him to hide the truth. The final edit of the book read: “Her grandfather occupied the chair of applied electricity in one of America’s best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and literally died in the harness.”

2) Don’t use God’s name in a vow we intend to do, but fail to follow through on, in other words, empty promises.

Turn in your Bible to the book of Matthew in the New Testament. **Matthew 5:33-37**

This calls into question the character of God through a lack of performance on our part. Find your way to the book of Ecclesiastes (right after Psalms and Proverbs).

Ecclesiastes 5:1-5

What about the marriage vow? This is a sacred oath taken before God, invoking God's name – sacred vows made as husband and wife, yet so often broken by unfaithfulness, separation, divorce.

The third commandment is vital because truthfulness is Christ's standard. Say "yes" and mean "yes." Say "no" and mean "no." That is why one of the deeper meanings of the third commandment is that Christians who take the name of Christ should not profane it by failing to live up to their word and their obligations.

3) Profanity

Profanity is the flagrant and irreverent use of God's name in ordinary conversation. It is a mark of vulgarity and an offense to God.

Why do people use profanity? I suppose there are many reasons; here are some:

- To show they have no fear of holy things
- To shock
- To manifest rebellion – rebellion against God, authority, rules, etc.
- Ignorance of the third commandment
- Bad habit
- Mimicking what they hear coming out of other's mouths

What's wrong with profanity? It tears down our respect for God and hinders our relationship with him. We are living in a day where everything is demeaned; nothing is sacred, nothing is held in high esteem. Our whole culture seems bent on how irreverent it can be – a sort of swaggering before the holy.

The way we speak is a measure of the true attitude we have. There is a strong correlation between your heart and your mouth. Listen to Jesus:

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. – *Matthew 12:34-37*

To use profanity is to demean and despise God's name – to tear it down, to misuse his holy name, to denigrate and desecrate his holy character.

I think that flippant use of God's name would also fall under this commandment. How often do you hear this: "God, I didn't know that," or "God this" or "God that." What is happening? There is a dwindling respect for God. You don't have reverence for God in your heart if you speak of him that way. God demands reverence. If there is no reverence, then you do not have a close relationship with God.

Dr. David Seamands raises the question: "Do you know anyone who communes deeply with God, who is close to God, and who has the habit of misusing his name? Of course not. The person who learns true reverence knows God's name is the doorway to the audience chamber of the Lord."

Maybe we violate this commandment when we present our life's plans to God in prayer and then piously ask God to bless them – to put his stamp of approval on them. This, instead of asking God for his plans for my life.

I often wonder about politician's use of the phrase "God bless you" when it is just used as a political password for Americanism, patriotism, moralism. To one party it might be the counterweight to the other party's invoking of God's blessing and approval of them. Is it sincere or is it a careless use of God's name?

Finally, I suppose we violate this commandment when we don't live up to our profession of God's name. We are his children, called by his name. Yet we don't live like his child. Our lives sometimes bring dishonor to his name. In a sense, all sin is profaning the name of God, particularly when we refuse to repent and depart from sin.

The late Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood said that profane language is not as bad as giving God lip service. Perhaps the worst form of breaking the third commandment is hypocrisy.

C.R. Smith was one of the founders of American Airlines, and he once made a stopover in Nashville, Tennessee. When he did, he found two desks in the American Airlines corridor of the airport. On one, a phone was ringing away. Sitting at the other, with his feet propped up, was a man reading the newspaper. Smith walked up to him and said, "Your phone is ringing."

"That's reservations. I'm maintenance," the man replied.

Furious, Smith walked over to the desk, picked up the phone, and began talking to a man who urgently needed to get to California. Smith rattled off the schedule from memory to the man and hung up. The man from maintenance couldn't believe it! "Say, that was pretty

good!” he said. “Do you work for American?” “Yes, I do,” Smith answered. “And you used to.”

B. Reason for the Commandment

It is this: God is holy; his name is sacred. He is to be revered, respected, and yes, feared. He is jealous of his character, his name. David writes in Psalm 86:

All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O LORD, and shall glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God. Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name. – *Psalm 86:9-11*

So what should we do? How should we respond to this commandment?

C. Response to the Commandment

If using profanity, stop it. Listen to Paul’s admonition from Ephesians:

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.
– *Ephesians 4:29*

Second, get serious about God. Someone has said, “The greatest reason why people treat God irreverently is because they live their lives in complacency.”

Live in the presence of God. If God were to walk in here today, or into your office or home, how would you respond? But you see, God is here! He will be present in your house when you go home today, and in your office tomorrow morning. There is a need for awe and reverence towards God because we live in the presence of a holy and awesome God.

The way you treat God’s name will reveal much about your understanding of and relationship with God. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. Warren Wiersbe says, “What’s down in the well, comes up in the bucket.”

III. Final Thought

Just a reminder – keeping these commandments is not what brings grace to your heart. You don’t seek to keep these commandments to get God’s favor. You obey because you

have God's favor. God saved Israel, delivering them out of bondage. Then he says, "Now obey me."

God saves us out of the bondage of our sin. And then he says to us, "Now obey me."