

Series: “10 Keys to the Joyful Life”
#3: “Called to Live in the Power of God’s Name”
Exodus 20:7 and Acts 19:11-16 (NRSV)

By Pastor John Gill

What’s with all the swearing in politics these days? Beginning with this past presidential cycle, the number of politicians freely using vulgarities on line, in speeches and public comments has skyrocketed. A study reported by CNN recently reported 1571 instances of politician-profanity in 2017 alone ¹ - behavior that would have been unthinkable until recent years. Politicians have always been guilty of muttering curses under their breath – when they are off-mike or in the privacy of cocktail parties or private meetings, but these days, some politicians seem to be spewing out profanities deliberately as a tactic to get noticed or to seem tough. And it seems that the American public is now OK with it. A sad development.

And it’s not just politicians – profanity has become acceptable in movies and music and cable TV – and we are hearing it more and more in conversations in public places. Of course, most of the times that people curse, they don’t directly use God’s Name in vain, but more and more, they do. Again, a very sad development.

All this exposure to vulgarities has cause all of us to let down our guard. It’s become all too easy for you and me to slip up and say things in private that we would never utter in public! How many of us can honestly say that we have never let a curse word cross our lips in anger, or in frustration, or at someone who had wronged us, or when we hit our thumb with a hammer? It’s no wonder that the Apostle James warns us in his letter (chapter 3), “No one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. Brothers and sisters, this ought not be so.” Yes, we all have trouble controlling our tongues.

Today we come to the third commandment. Along with the first two, (1- Have no other Gods; and 2- Do not worship graven images), this third commandment forms something of a trilogy – all dealing with “who God is,” and “how we are to relate to Him.” The wording of this commandment that we are most familiar with is this: “Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his Name in vain.”

We all know what this commandment is all about – don’t we? It’s simply telling us to watch our tongues, right? - to be careful not to use “bad” words... And if we do happen to let one slip, never to use the “Name of God” or “Jesus” with it.

That’s the popular interpretation of this verse. But if that is all that it means, then why does God attach such a severe punishment for those who break it? Is God THAT insecure about His Name that He would elevate cursing to the level of an “unpardonable sin?” - - - “The Lord will not hold him guiltless...” or “will not acquit anyone...” or “those who do will not escape punishment,” (depending on the translation). God doesn’t say that stealing, adultery, murder, or even having other gods is unpardonable – only “using His Name in vain!”

Does that mean that if you or I have ever said G.D., or other expletive using the Names of God or Jesus, that we are automatically condemned to hell without any recourse? If so, then what does that say

about our belief that the Blood of Jesus can cover ALL sins, - that by faith in the grace and mercy of God we can be forgiven, no matter what we have done? What's going on here? Certainly, there must be more to this commandment than simply warning us about cussing!

Well, like the first two commandments we have looked at, there is ALSO more to this one than meets the eye. Certainly, it is true that this commandment is against using God's or Jesus' Name in connection with curse words... that goes without saying. But, there is much more to it than that.

It's not enough for us to think that, if we just watch our language and avoid using those kinds of words, then we have been faithful in keeping this commandment. I dare say there are some of us here this morning – perhaps most of us – who would never even THINK of using bad words, much less allow them to pass our lips – who break the spirit of this commandment all the time.

The reason we don't see it is because we don't understand the power inherent in names. Just as with the first two commandments, we cannot understand why this commandment carries with it such a severe penalty unless we understand the role of names in the Bible. In the Bible, a person's character was synonymous with their name. To use someone's name, therefore, was to tap into the identity and authority of that person – the name gave the one calling on that name power. That's why, when Moses was standing before the burning bush and asked God what God's Name was, God gave such a vague answer - "Tell them 'I Am' has sent you." The Hebrew word for "I Am" is Yahweh – a name that really is no name at all! God was not about to give a name that Moses might be tempted to misuse, or to use to manipulate God.

Last week we saw how, in ancient times pagans would call upon the names of their gods trying to draw upon their power for their own purposes. Even today, we understand that our names and our identities are connected. When you draw up a contract or other legal document, it has no validity until you affix your name to it. And, once you have signed your name on the dotted line, you are bound by the terms of that agreement. You ARE your name. It is your identity.

Now imagine the power of the Name of God or Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, he "signed his Name" in blood to a document offering us forgiveness and eternal life. By the way, that is why we end our prayers "In Jesus' Name..." To use the Name of Jesus, then, is like using his signature and calling upon the power of that Name. You just can't go around and use that "signature" any ole way you want! If the Name of Jesus is synonymous with the person of Jesus, then we had better be careful how we use His Name!

But not only do names carry our identity, they also transmit our authority. When a king or president sends out ambassadors to foreign lands, those ambassadors are recognized, NOT based on their own merits, but based on the merits of the king or president who they represent. When ambassadors communicate with foreign governments, they speak "in the name and authority" of the king or president. That's exactly what the prophets of Jewish Scripture did when they proclaimed, "Thus sayeth the Lord..." They were speaking with the authority of the Name of God. As you can see, to call on the Name of the Lord, then, is serious business. It is not to be done lightly or casually or unworthily. And if we do, then we have to answer to the One in whose Name we are claiming to speak.

So, when you say or do something unworthy "in God's Name," you are identifying that which you have said or done with the character and identity of God himself. And by calling on the Name of God, you are claiming God's authority to be applied toward some ungodly purpose.

So, you see, “taking God’s Name in vain” isn’t limited to uttering his Name along with a few choice words in a fit of rage. “Taking God’s Name in vain” involves ANY misuse of His Name, His identity, or His authority.

After all, what does the word “vain” mean? The dictionary defines it with these words: “empty, groundless, without basis, frivolous, insincere.” In other words, “taking God’s Name in vain” is any misrepresentation of His Name, especially when it is used to serve our own ungodly purposes. (I told you there was more to this command than meets the eye!)

I believe there are three ways we can take God’s Name in vain.

First of all, by using God’s Name:

1. Flippantly.

This is the sin of those who speak the Name of God or refer to Jesus in an irreverent fashion.

Probably without even thinking, their words contradict the very character of God. To say the Name of God along with the word, “damn,” they misrepresent the heart of God... for the scriptures tell us (1 Timothy 2:3-4) that God “desires everyone to be saved and (to) come to the knowledge of the truth.” Therefore, to flippantly call on the Name of God to damn someone to hell just because we happen to be angry with them is contrary to God’s will, and God will hold us accountable for that. So, first of all, we sin if we use God’s Name flippantly.

We also “take his Name in vain” when we use it:

2. Misleadingly.

As I said, we don’t have to curse to take God’s Name in vain. We do it whenever we use God’s Name to justify our own agendas.

In our divisive political climate, we hear various groups on both extremes of the political spectrum seeking to justify their political positions by claiming that God is on their side. Clergy and laity holding opposite views on issues invoke the Name of the very same God. Even hate groups justify their hatred by misrepresenting God.

Perhaps you’ve heard the name, Johnny Lee Clancy. At one time, he was the Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. As the leader of the KKK, Clancy believed it was his Christian duty to work for the Klan, which teaches that God’s chosen people were white people. But like Paul on the road to Damascus, Johnny Lee Clancy had a true Christian conversion experience. He renounced his former life and spoke out boldly about his new-found faith. Listen to what he said in an interview:

“I realized that I had been using God’s Name in vain. I realized that I had been distorting God’s word claiming God’s word was something it was not. And when you take God’s Name in vain, that doesn’t mean that you say a cuss word with God’s Name in it. Taking God’s Name in vain is to try to justify hatred. The most profane thing you can have is hatred for another race. And when you use God to justify that hatred, that’s taking his Name in vain.”

Friends, I've got news for you! We don't have to be hate-mongers to be guilty of using God's Name in misleading ways in order to justify our own beliefs and agenda. We do it all the time!

Besides using God's Name flippantly and misleadingly, we take his Name in vain in a much more subtle way – we use it:

3) Trivially.

To some extent, every one of us has been guilty here. Maybe we would never curse or use God's Name misleadingly to justify our own false beliefs, but most of us have been guilty of taking our faith so casually that it has no meaning for us.

In Minnesota, three pastors got together for coffee one day and found all their churches had a bat-infestation problem. "I got so mad," said Pastor Johnson, "that I took a shotgun and fired it at them. It made holes in the ceiling, but did nothing to the bats." Pastor Smith chimed in, "I tried trapping them alive - then I drove them fifty miles before I released them – but they returned." Then Pastor Stephens said, "I haven't had any more problems." "What did you do?" they ask asked. "I simply baptized and confirmed them, and I haven't seen them since!"

Too many people are like those bats. In the Name of God, they stand before the altar (this one or another) and profess their faith in the saving power of the Name of Jesus Christ. They are baptized and confirmed, or have their babies baptized, and then they turn around and walk out of the church, and you never see them again.

Then there are those who may attend church with some regularity, but do not live the Christian life in all the other areas of their lives. Their attitudes and actions do not reflect the teachings of Jesus! Except for having their name on the church rolls, no one they work with or socialize with would ever guess they were a disciple of Jesus!

I believe that, of all the ways to take God's Name in vain, treating God's Name trivially like this, is what angers God the most. To claim the Name of God, and then treat it so cavalierly, is the ultimate insult to God.

But there is still something even more basic about this commandment we have to consider:

There is a fascinating story in the 19th chapter of the Book of Acts that illustrates an important point about using and misusing God's Name. And indeed, I believe it is the key to understanding the third commandment. We read it earlier:

It seems that Paul had been having a very effective ministry in Ephesus performing many miracles in the Name of Jesus. Now there were some Jewish exorcists – seven sons of a man named Sceva, who happened to observe these miracles. So, when they came upon a man possessed by demons, they decided they would heal him by calling upon the Name of this "Jesus" that Paul was referring to. But as they attempted it, the demon called out... "Jesus I know, and Paul I know – but who are you?"

You see, the power of God is available to us through his Name, but the power only becomes activated when it is backed up by a relationship with the One whose Name we call upon. The sons of Sceva knew

enough to use the Name of Jesus, but they did not have a relationship with Jesus. And so, they had no power. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, “Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” It’s not just what we say with our lips, but believe in our hearts that matters.

So, I believe this commandment can be summed up like this: To claim God’s Name without having a relationship with God to back it up – is to “take his Name in vain.” (Repeat)

As Christians, when we were baptized and professed our faith before the altar of God, we claimed the power of God’s Name in our lives. We took on the Name of Christ – “Christian.” But, if we don’t have a relationship with Jesus Christ, then the Name we bear carries no power – and we are not saved! It’s just as Paul wrote in Romans (10:9): “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” You see, “praying the prayer” is not enough...

So, the penalty for breaking this commandment is proven true! Those who “take God’s Name in vain” – that is – those who speak the Name of Jesus but have no relationship with Him – have no authority to claim the power of His Name. They will not be saved – indeed, “the Lord will not hold him guiltless” because, by their lack of faith, they have CHOSEN to remain unforgiven.

In reality, this commandment may be the most challenging of them all. It says that, when we call on the Name of Jesus, one of two things will happen: Either 1) we will live in the power of the Name we profess, OR 2) we won’t.

Do you have a relationship with Jesus – or are you just a Name-dropper?

¹ CNN Politics website, Dec. 3, 2018