

The Third Commandment

Exodus 20:7

What's in a name?

In the next few minutes I am going to read out some names to you.

They are the names of people, or places, or things that each of us will recognise for one reason or another.

Some are famous.

Some are infamous.

As I read out the name, I'd like you to think about what these names mean to you.

What associations do they draw out?

Is the name positive or negative for you?

Why do you know this name?

Okay, here we go...

- Gallipoli
- John Lennon
- Pol Pot
- Adolf Hitler
- Donald Bradman
- Julius Caesar
- William Shakespeare
- Titanic
- Apollo
- Mao Tse Tung
- Azaria Chamberlain
- Pearl Harbour

Names are interesting things, aren't they?

Names are sort of like buckets that you can hold a whole lot of other ideas in.

Or they are like clothes pegs that you can hang a whole lot of ideas on.

Names capture events.

They encase reputations.

They are grab bags of entire networks of ideas.

Now tonight's sermon is about names.

It is about one particular name – God's name.

It is about how we view God's name and use God's name.

Tonight's sermon is about the third commandment.

For in the third commandment God says to his people Israel:

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

So, let's have a look at this commandment and see what we can make of it.

Exploring the Third Commandment

In its original context

- Background – Exodus 3

However, before we do, we need to do some background work.

We need to look at two passages – Exodus 3 and Exodus 9:16.

Let's turn to Exodus 3 first.

In Exodus 3 we find Moses out in the wilderness tending sheep for his father-in-law – Jethro.

While he is there he comes across a bush that is burning.

He is intrigued by it because it is burning but is not being burnt up.

And as he takes a closer look at it, God begins to speak to him.

And in the course of the conversation, God reveals his name to Moses.

Take a look at verses 13-15 with me.

¹³ *Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then 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 by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.*

There are a number of things to say here.

First, I need to introduce you to a common convention used in our English translations of the Bible.

In most of our English Old Testaments you will notice that the word 'Lord' is sometimes printed entirely in capitals.

We have an example of this in verse 7 of Exodus 3.

This practice of printing the word 'Lord' in capitals is a way of telling us that if we could read Hebrew we would find ourselves reading a 4 consonant Hebrew word.

The four consonants are YHWH.

Although we can't be certain, scholars have estimated that these four consonants probably had the vowel 'a' between the Y and the H and the vowel 'e' between the W and the second H.

In other words, the word was probably pronounced 'Yahweh'.

Now this word 'Yahweh' was the Jewish special word for God.

It was the special name they had for their God.

It was the name by which they knew God.

And what this passage does is that it gives a sort of interpretation of this name.

You see, the phrase 'I am who I am' or 'I am who I will be' sounds very similar to the word 'Yahweh'.

Now, my guess is that the phrase used in this verse probably means, 'I am who I will be' or 'I will be who I will be'.

So, what is happening in this verse is that God is saying that from now on when they use his name they should understand that it means something.

It means that he is the God whose nature can be known by how he acts in the future to deliver Israel from Egypt.

Who he is...

What his name means...

Will be made clear by what he does in the future.

- Background – Exodus 9:16

Okay, this is our first bit of background.

The second bit of background comes from Exodus 9:16.

Let's have a look at it together.

The situation is quite different now.

Moses has been called by God to be God's agent in rescuing his people.

God and Pharaoh are locked in combat and Moses is God's spokesman.

God is pouring out plagues upon Egypt and Pharaoh is resisting God's call to let his people go.

In Exodus 9:13 God gives some instructions to Moses.

Take a look at them with me.

¹³ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, ¹⁴ or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. ¹⁶ But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go. ¹⁸ Therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now. ¹⁹ Give an order now to bring your livestock and everything you have in the field to a place of shelter, because the hail will fall on every man and animal that has not been brought in and is still out in the field, and they will die.'"

Notice verse 16.

God is saying that through what happens to the Israelites and the Egyptians the whole world will come to know his name.

In other words, he is about to give his name some content.

From the time of Egypt on, when his name is mentioned people will think of the events of Egypt.

They will think of a God who saves his people.

They will think of the God who was victorious over Pharaoh.

They will think of a God who loves his people and who judges those who set themselves against his people.

The events of Exodus will proclaim the nature and reputation of Yahweh.

- The literal meaning of key words

Okay, there are out two bits of background.

Now let's have a look at some of the words here and what they mean.

First of all, let me give you a literal translation of the verse:

Exodus 20, verse 7, can be literally translated this way:

You shall not lift up the name of Yahweh, your God, for misuse. For Yahweh will not acquit him who lifts up his name for misuse.

There are two words to take notice of here.

The first word is the word 'lift up'.

This word can mean 'to lift up' or 'to raise' or 'to carry' or even 'to wear'.

In other words, this passage is talking about how God's people lift up, or carry, or wear God's name.

It is about how God's people use God's name in a public context.

It is about how God's people use God's name in the world.

The second word we need to focus in on is the word 'misuse' used in the phrase 'for misuse'. The word literally means 'worthless' or 'emptiness' or 'vanity' or even 'without substance'. Take a look at Exodus 23:1 where this word is used.

"Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness."

The word 'false' is the word we are looking at.

Literally the verse says:

'Do not spread empty reports'

or

'Do not spread reports without substance.'

This is the word that is used in Exodus 20:7.

So, here is my new draft translation of Exodus 20:7

You shall not lift up the name of Yahweh, your God, for empty purposes. For Yahweh will not acquit him who lifts up his name for empty purposes.

Or, if you want a more literal translation:

You shall not lift up the name of Yahweh, your God, pointlessly. For Yahweh will not acquit him who lifts up his name pointlessly.

- Some common interpretations

Okay, now let's look at some common ways in which this verse has been translated.

The first option is to translate it this way:

'You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God.'

If we do translate it this way then the commandment is all about using God's name in an oath and then not fulfilling your oath.

In other words, it is about using God's name pointlessly or emptily in a promise.

With this in mind, take a look at what the second half of the verse.

In the second half of the verse, God says that he will punish very severely those who don't fulfil their promises made in God's name.

God will not hold anyone guiltless who uses his name falsely in this way.

He will not acquit people who speak in this manner.

You can see what this verse means when it is used this way, can't you?

Imagine the context.

You make a promise or give an oath.

You want to give it God's authority.

You want to show how serious it is.

And you want the person hearing the promise to know that you mean it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

And so you use the name of God in the promise.

You say something like this,

As Yahweh lives, I will surely do this.

As Yahweh lives, I will surely do that.

There are lots of examples of such promises or oaths in the Old Testament

For example, after David has been caught in adultery in 2 Samuel 12, Nathan the prophet comes to him and tells him a story that is designed to expose his sinfulness.

David listens to the story and then pronounces his judgement on the culprit in the story.

He says this:

As surely as Yahweh lives, the man who has done this deserves to die.

By using God's special name he is emphasising that he has bound himself to punish the culprit.

He does so knowing that if he does not keep this oath, then he has used the name of God falsely.

Alright, we've had a look at the first option for translating this verse.

Now let's have a look at the second option.

The second option is to translate the verse using the name 'misuse'.

Some ways in which you could misuse God's name include the one we've already mentioned – using God's name in an oath and then not fulfilling it.

Other ways of misusing God's name might be...

- To use God's name in such a way as to harm them – such as using God's name in a curse upon someone.
- To use God's name flippantly.
- To use God's name to validate a particular action that is against God's wishes or will.

Again, there are numerous examples in the Old Testament of people misusing God's name in this manner.

For example, the false prophets often used God's name as a means of validating their prophecies.

The Israelites often used God's name as though it were a sort of magical charm.

An example of this can be found in Jeremiah 7 where the Israelites say over and over to themselves 'This is the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh' as though this would protect them and their city from destruction.

Because the temple was Yahweh's temple, it did not matter that they were grossly sinful people.

- Putting things together

It is clear from the two options that I've given you that this commandment can mean a broad range of things.

In my view, we should opt for the broadest range of meanings.

Let me explain.

As we've seen when we looked at the background to this passage, the book of Exodus has a lot to say about God's name.

As we've seen from Exodus 3, it is in the book of Exodus that God gives his name to his people and reveals its meaning.

Exodus 9:16 tells us that one of the purposes of God's actions for his people has been that his name might be declared throughout all the earth.

We can see from this that God's name is very important to him.

He is concerned that people know his name, hear his name, and that what is heard has an appropriate effect.

He wants people to hear his name, know his name, and be drawn to his name.

His purpose in his world is that people come to know his name and that it be a name that is welcomed and honoured.

This is what I think this commandment is about.

God is saying that he has called his people to be his people.

They are a people associated with him and therefore associated with his name.

He has joined himself to them.

He has given them his name.

And in doing so, he has placed his name, or his reputation at risk.

For his people wear his name.

They carry his name.

They take up his name.

And they can do this in positive ways.
They can honour his name.
They can proclaim his name.
They can live in a way that enhances his reputation.
They can praise his name.
They can use his name in prayerful dependence.
They can make known his name and his deeds to the world.
They can adorn his name with their words and their deeds.
In other words, they can so act and speak that when people see them they are reminded positively about God.
And whenever this happens, the people of God fulfil God's purpose of reaching the world.
However, God's people can also bring God's name or reputation into disrepute.
As people who wear God's name, they can, by their words and deeds dishonour him.
While wearing his name they can speak or act in a way that causes the world to shun him and demean him.
To do this is to treat his gift of salvation with disrespect.
It is to disrespect his name and his person.
It is to misrepresent him to his world.
Paul talks about this in Romans 2:17-23 where he says that the actions of Jews throughout history has caused God's name to be blasphemed among the nations.
As you can see, I think the meaning of the third commandment is very broad.
I think God is telling his people that they should not lift up his name in a way that misrepresents or diminishes him in his world.
They can do this in a multitude of ways.
This includes false oaths or promises.
It includes using his name in inappropriate ways.
But it also includes many other things.

New Testament echoes

Now let's turn to the New Testament.
It seems to me that there are at least two prominent echoes of this commandment.
Interestingly, both of them appear in one of the first extended public teaching events in the life of Jesus.
Turn with me to Matthew 5-7 – the sermon on the mount.
The first echo comes in chapter 5.
If you've read Matthew 5 you'll notice that there are lots and lots of echoes of the 10 commandments.
The verses that appear to have echoes of the third commandment are verses 33-37.
Jesus says,
Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'
But I tell you, 'Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.'
And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.
Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' No;
Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.
Although Jesus does not quote the third commandment, he does echo one of the clear interpretations of the commandment given in Leviticus 19:12.

Jesus seems to hone in on the oath taking element of it.
And what he says is that oaths are inappropriate anyway.
God's person does not need to use God's name to make his word more respected.
God's person should be so honest that their word is their word.
It does not need to be strengthened or validated by using God's name.
This is the first echo of the third commandment that we hear in the Sermon on the Mount.
The second echo can be found in a strange place – in the Lord's prayer as it is given in Matthew 6.
Look at verses 9ff.

Jesus said,

This is how you should pray...
Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Notice the first line of the prayer that Jesus gives:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

The echo of the third commandment is in the mention of God's name.
To hallow God's name means to give God's name the honour due to it.
It means to give God the honour that is due to him.
Now in the Old Testament, God often speaks of how the people of Israel had dishonoured his name among the nations.

Instead of keeping the covenant he made with them, they had rejected it.
Their unfaithfulness and ungodliness had been displayed among the nations.
And as a result, God's reputation, God's name, had been brought into disrepute.
And what Jesus is saying is that his people should pray for the situation where this is no longer the case.

They should pray for the situation to come about where God's name might be hallowed or honoured.
Where God might be known for who he really is and what he has really done.
Where he might be praised and blessed and proclaimed and glorified.
Where his name, his reputation, might no longer be slandered because of the actions of his people.
This is what God wants.
This is what his people should pray for.
This is what his people should live for.

What does it mean for us?

What it doesn't mean

Okay, we've had a look at the original commandment.
We've had a look at what it meant in parts of the Old Testament.
And we've had a look at some echoes of it in the teaching of Jesus.
Now let's see if we can work out what this commandment means for us in the 21st century.
First, let me say what I don't think it means.
I don't think that this commandment is fundamentally about using God's name as a swear word.
I don't think that the third commandment should be used to tell people to stop saying 'God!' or 'Christ!' as an exclamation.

There may be good grounds for telling people that you find this offensive.
However, I don't think that Exodus 20:7 should be used for this purpose.
I think that using this verse for this purpose misses the fundamental point of this verse.

Some positive possibilities

Okay, having said this, let's think about some positive possibilities.

First, most of us here are Christians.

That is, we have the name of Jesus in our own name.

When people think of us, they associate us with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In other words, we carry or wear the name of Jesus.

Now there are lots of ways in which we can wear this name in a way that is positive.

We can wear it positively by being people who speak and act in a way that gives glory to Jesus.

We do this when we proclaim what Jesus has done for us in saving us.

We do this when we live in a way that enhances his reputation.

We do this when we sing songs of praise that are full of his person and his deeds.

We do this when we call upon God in prayerful dependence through Jesus Christ.

We do this when we submit to baptism in the name of Jesus.

We do this whenever we act and speak in such a way that people are positively reminded about Jesus.

Whenever we do these things we do not take the name of the Lord our God pointlessly.

A modern practice that breaks the commandment

Before I wrap things up tonight, I'd like to comment on a modern practice that I think breaks this commandment.

This modern practice is probably very ancient.

It's just that I hear it more and more often in a modern guise.

Let me give you some examples.

Imagine a Pastor of a church who is struggling with a church that is set against the direction he is wanting to take it in.

He has been unable to convince them by argument.

He has been unable to convince them through preaching the scriptures.

He knows what is good for them.

And eventually he brings out the big gun.

He tells his congregation that God has told him that this is what they are to do.

Then he goes on to tell them that to disagree with him is to oppose God's will.

Or, imagine another situation.

A Christian man is ill with terminal cancer.

His friends and family greatly care for him.

They pray for him to be healed.

One friend from church is praying for him and decides that it is God's clear will to heal him.

He goes to the church and he goes to his ill friend.

And he says, 'I've been praying and God has told me that it is his will that my friend is healed. Let's pray together and God will heal him.'

And so the friends, and the church, and the family pray together.

And the man is not healed.

And he dies.

Both of these examples represent a common trend.

In neither of these situations is God's will known for certain.
Each of the people are convinced under God that God's will is for a particular action.
However, they cannot know for certain.
And yet they invoke the name of God as a way of ratifying their position.
They invoke it as a way of giving them authority.
And in both cases, God is dishonoured by their conduct.
We need to be very careful in our use of God's name.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by getting you to reflect upon the exercise we did at the beginning of this talk.
Do you remember how I listed a whole lot of names of people, events, or locations?
Remember how I asked you to think about the associations that are conjured up in your mind by these names.
Well, now I want you to think about your friends and relatives.
I want you to think about how they would react to the name of Jesus Christ.
What do they think of him?
Do you think that his name brings positive associations for them?
Is his name one that comes to their ears positively?
Or is his name one that comes to them negatively?
And then I want you to think about your own contribution to how they hear the name of Jesus.
Has your bearing the name of Jesus made any difference to their attitude to Jesus?
Has it made a positive impact?
Or has it caused them to react more negatively to the person of Jesus?
And if it is negatively, then is this because they don't like the truth?
Or is it because your words and actions have been such that they have betrayed the character and deeds of Jesus?
Have you worn the name of your saviour with honour?
Or have you worn the name of Jesus without substance ... pointlessly?