

A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard, when suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the odd thing but the right thing and slowed to a stop, even though he could have beaten the red light by speeding through the intersection.

The tailgating woman missed her chance to get through the intersection and she hit the roof and her horn, screaming in frustration, and using hand gestures with a single finger just in case the man did not get her message.

As she was still ranting, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After several hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing up a storm at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk and naturally, I assumed – you had stolen the car."

Two weeks ago, we began our walk through the Ten Commandments – the moral standards that God formally gave to His people. We looked at the first Commandment and learned *who* we are to worship – that being God and God alone. Then last week we looked at the second Commandment and considered *how* we are to worship – we are to have no idols in our lives, no substitutes, and no counterfeit gods who can steal our hearts away from the one true God.

This morning we've made it to the third Commandment, a commandment you have surely heard before where God says to His people,

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”

I suspect that the vast majority of you are familiar with this commandment, and I also suspect that the vast majority of you are probably under the impression that this commandment is only about profanity – a rule that prohibits using God's name as a cuss word after you stub your toe – but I am here to tell you that there is so much more to this third Commandment than to simply “*watch your mouth.*”

Now, as I did last week, I want to introduce this commandment with a story. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **1 Kings 22**, and before we begin, I need to set it up.

If you recall Old Testament history, there was a time when God's people, who were living in the Promised Land, were divided into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. There were ten tribes in the north and two tribes in the south, and at the time of this story, Ahab is the king of Israel – a very wicked king who is married to Jezebel, and Jehoshaphat is the king of Judah, and he is described as a good king. So, these two kings are an “odd couple” of sort.

Three years had passed with peace between Israel and the neighboring country of Syria, but previously, the King of Syria had lost a battle to Israel, and he promised to return certain cities to Israel in exchange for their leniency, and one of these cities to be returned was Ramoth-gilead. It was an important city due to its strategic location, but the King of Syria never returned it to Israel as promised. So, King Ahab of Israel asked King Jehoshaphat of Judah to help him by joining their military forces to take the city back from the King of Syria.

King Jehoshaphat agreed to help for political reasons and because his son was married to King Ahab's daughter, but spiritually he was still uneasy about it, he had second thoughts, and he told King Ahab they should seek a word from the LORD to confirm if it was God's will that they go into battle against Syria. So, King Ahab gathered 400 prophets to speak a word from the Lord. These may have been pagan prophets or unfaithful prophets, but whoever they were, they claimed to hear from the Lord and to speak on His behalf. They claimed to represent God, when the truth be told, they simply said whatever they thought King Ahab wanted to hear. They were “yes men on the king's payroll” who knew how to “scratch the king's ear” so to speak, and they all said in agreement, **“Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.”**

Apparently, King Jehoshaphat had some reservations about these 400 prophets who seemed a little too eager to please – he suspected they were not truly representing the LORD as they had claimed, and so he asked King Ahab, **“Is there not yet a prophet of the LORD here that we may inquire of him?”**

King Ahab replied, *“There is this one prophet, but he never says anything nice about me. His name is Micaiah and I really hate him.”* Well, King Jehoshaphat wanted to hear from him anyway, so Micaiah was summoned by Ahab to appear before them.

While the kings waited for Micaiah to arrive, these 400 prophets gave this entertaining and dramatic presentation and continued to falsely claim to represent the Lord, saying **“Go up to Ramoth-gilead and prosper, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.”** One of these prophets was named Zedekiah, and he made horns of iron as a symbol of military might, and he said to the kings, **“Thus says the LORD, ‘With these you will gore the Arameans until they are consumed.’”** In other words, *“The LORD told me to tell you that you will completely destroy the Syrians until they are no more.”*

These 400 prophets were really putting on a show for these two kings, but fortunately, Micaiah shows up to save the day, and he is brought before the kings, their royal officials, and these 400 prophets – and that brings us to **verse 15**. We read,

When he came to the king, the king said to him, “Micaiah, shall we go to Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we refrain?” And he answered him, “Go up and succeed, and the Lord will give it into the hand of the king.”

Micaiah had been previously told by the messenger, who summoned him, what the other 400 prophets were proclaiming, and the messenger recommended that Micaiah should not make any waves but agree with them, and say only what King Ahab wanted to hear. So, Micaiah was asked if they should go take the city, and Micaiah said the same thing the 400 prophets had said. He told King Ahab exactly what he wanted to hear, and we might think that Ahab should be happy, but notice his response in **verse 16**.

Then the king said to him, “How many times must I adjure you to speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?”

Apparently, from the tone of Micaiah’s voice, his answer was given in a very sarcastic manner – in essence, he was mimicking and mocking the 400 prophets and everyone knew it, but Ahab had enough and told Micaiah to tell the truth, and beginning with **verse 17**, that’s exactly what he gets.

¹⁷ So he said, **“I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep which have no shepherd. And the Lord said, ‘These have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace.’”** ¹⁸ Then the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, **“Did I not tell you that he would not prophesy good concerning me, but evil?”**

Micaiah gave it to them straight from the Lord, and he proclaimed that if these two kings went to war with Syria, all of Israel would be scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd – without their king. In other words, Micaiah predicted the death of King Ahab. This was the complete opposite of what the 400 prophets had predicted – but Ahab asked for the truth, he just didn't want to hear it.

King Ahab tells King Jehoshaphat, *“I knew he'd say that! I told you he doesn't like me!”* But Micaiah interrupts and says, *“this is not a matter of my words against your words, these words come from the Lord who is seated on His throne in heaven, unlike the words from your 400 prophets who say only what you want to hear. They are deceived and they are deceiving you.”*

Well unfortunately, the kings ignored the truth, Ahab threw Micaiah into prison with only bread and water, and they went to battle against Syria, and just as Micaiah proclaimed, Ahab was struck between a section of armor with a random arrow shot in the air, and he died.

I presented this story to you this morning because these 400 prophets claimed to hear and speak for the Lord, but they misrepresented and dishonored Him, and that directly relates to the third Commandment. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Exodus 20:7**, so we can take a closer look at it. We read,

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”

God's choice of words in this Commandment are very important in helping us to understand what He means – so, let me explain some of these words used in this command.

First, God says, **“You shall not take.”** That word **“take”** in Hebrew literally means *“to lift up, to raise, or to carry”* and the idea is that we don't want to lift up or carry God's name in such a way as to bring dishonor and disrespect to Him. To me, this would apply to more than just what comes out of our mouths.

Now, if you notice, two times in this verse we see the word **“name”**. Names are important for they help us to identify one another, and more importantly our names are associated with our character and our reputation. If it is said that someone has *“a bad name,”* it's not that their literal name is being criticized, it's their character and their reputation that is being criticized, unless you are the guy with the name *Charles Stink*.

All throughout his life, Charles Stink was frequently harassed because of his name and his friends and coworkers suggested that he have it changed. So, Charles when to court and did just that. When he met with his friends afterwards, they asked him what his new name was, and he replied, “it’s now George Stink, but I don’t see how that’s going to make any difference.”

Names are like labels, and they can influence how we feel or think about a person. For example, if someone mentions the name of “*Trish*” to me, it creates a positive feeling, for that is my wife’s name, and she told me to only think positive things about her. But if you mention the name “*Hitler*”, then the feeling is completely negative because I automatically associate his name to Nazi war crimes.

Names are important to us, and even more so for people in the Bible. In the Bible, a name told a lot about a person – even defining their purpose and mission in life, and many times in the Bible, when something significant happened to a person to change their purpose and mission – their name was changed as well. For example, Abram was changed to Abraham. Jacob was changed to Israel. Simon was changed to Peter, and Saul became Paul.

So, a person’s name is important, but when it comes to God, it’s a really big deal for His name encompasses His nature, His power and authority, His identity and His attributes.

In our third Commandment, God calls Himself “**LORD**”, and if you notice in your Bible, **LORD** is in all caps. In Hebrew, it is translated *Yahweh* which literally means “**I AM**” and that name reveals several truths about God. He has no beginning and no end. He is ever-present – from everlasting to everlasting. God is self-existent and self-sufficient, meaning He is completely independent; however, everything and everyone is totally dependent on Him. God is constant. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God is sovereign, and He has no constraints. God does what He pleases and what He pleases is always right. He is who He is, so we can see, that when it comes to God, His name gives us a lot to consider – for it’s a name that is above every other name, it’s a name that sets Him apart from all others, and it’s a name that cannot be separated from who He is, and that understanding brings some clarity to several passages.

For example, we are told in **Acts 4:12**,

“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved.”

In **Romans 10:13**, the Apostle Paul tells us,

“Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Then in **Philippians 2:10-11**, we are told there will come a time, like it or not,

“that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

So, it's impossible to separate God's name from who He is, and I think this was the idea that Jesus was expressing to His disciples when He was teaching them to pray. If you recall, Jesus began by saying:

“Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name.”

God's name is more than just a few letters arranged in a row. His name captures His very essence, His character, His attributes and His nature, and Jesus tells us to think on these things – to consider who we are really talking to when we pray.

In our third Commandment, we also see the words **“in vain”** mentioned twice. In Hebrew, it means to treat something as being *“empty and useless, meaningless or worthless.”* It speaks to taking something lightly and carelessly, when it should be taken seriously and used carefully with great respect. Taking the Lord's name **“in vain”** is to speak of God or to represent Him in a disrespectful or unworthy way.

*When I was a teenager living under my parents' roof, occasionally my father would tell me before I went out, “Remember whose name you carry.” **What did he mean by that?** My last name is not a royal name, it's not a name for the history books, there's nothing special about it as far as I can tell, but what my father was saying was that I represented someone other than myself – I also represented him. I carried his family name, and what I said and what I did would be a reflection on him, on his character and on his reputation. In essence, my father was saying “Remember whose son you are and whose name you carry. Don't take my name in vain.”*

The Apostle Paul tells us in **Colossians 3:17**,

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

So yes, according to **Leviticus 24:16**, we can take the Lord's name in vain with our vulgar choice of words using His name, and yes, we can take the Lord's name in vain by swearing a false oath in His name or making a promise that we do not intend to keep as stated in **Leviticus 19:12**, and yes, we can take the Lord's name in vain by claiming that God said something He did not say as described in our story about the 400 and also mentioned in **Jeremiah 23:25** – but – and this is where the rubber really meets the road for me, we can also take the Lord's name in vain by carrying His name as a Christian, claiming to be a follower of Christ – a child of God and yet living as if He really doesn't matter.

Now, I suspect that at the beginning of my message this morning, many of you thought you had this third Commandment in the bag – you've watched your mouth, you don't use God's name as a cuss word when you hit your thumb with a hammer, but now you realize there is so more to this Commandment than you initially thought, and it very likely you have violated this Commandment more than any other of the Ten Commandments. So, let's get to the heart of the matter.

Turn to **Matthew 15**. One day Jesus was dealing with some self-righteous religious leaders. They had come from Jerusalem, the headquarters of Judaism, to speak with Jesus, really to shut Him down, because His disciples weren't following their man-made rules and traditions.

Well, Jesus goes on the offensive for He knew these men only gave the outward appearance of being devoted to God, they only claimed to abide by God's moral standards, they went through the motions so to speak so as to look spiritual on the outside, and yet Jesus knew the truth – they were hypocrites, wearing religious masks to appear godly by following their own rules, when in fact, they were in rebellion against God, and their hearts were hardened towards Him. Then Jesus said of them in **Matthew 15:8-9** using a quote from Isaiah,

***⁸This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.
⁹But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.***

In this passage, Jesus said their worship of God was in vain. It was empty and pointless and meaningless, for they had substituted the true worship of God with their own set of religious rules. They were all about religion and failed to understand that what God really wanted with His people was a relationship, an exclusive relationship – which just so happens to be expressed in the first and second of the Ten Commandments.

Jesus said, their hearts were far from their God. The heart of the problem was their hearts. The religious leaders knew a lot about God, they claimed to be people of God, they claimed His name, but they didn't love God and follow Him.

In **Matthew 7**, beginning with **verse 21**, Jesus said something I want you to hear. I have shared it with you before in past, but in light of what we have covered this morning, I hope you listen with a new set of ears. Jesus said,

²¹“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²²Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’

In this passage, Jesus described these people as being religious but they had no real relationship with God. They *claimed* the Lord's name three times, but they never *copied* His example. They *called* Him their Lord, they *claimed* to represent Him, but they *chose* not follow Him. They took His name in vain.

Charles Spurgeon commented on this passage and he said, *“Three times over, the person is described as doing all “in thy name”; and yet the Lord, whose name he used so freely, so boldly, knew nothing of him, and would not suffer him to remain in His company. The Lord cannot endure the presence of those who call Him “Lord, Lord”, and then work iniquity. They professed to Him that they knew Him; but He will profess unto them, “I never knew you.”*

It will be a horrible day if Jesus says to you, *“I loved you more than you could ever know. When you were at your worst, I died for you – but I don't associate your name with My name. There's no connection, there's no relationship between the two, and in that respect, I never knew you – depart from Me.”*

For those who are followers of Christ, we get the awesome privilege to carry His name for He carried our cross – and because we carry His name, a family name, we have the responsibility to carry it well, to honor His name, to honor Him, with love and gratitude, with trust and obedience.

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