

Carved in Stone

Embracing God's Value System

Adult Lesson Five

What's In A Name?

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name (Exodus 20:7, NRSV).

The third commandment continues outlining the regulations for relationship with the LORD, the God of Israel, this time dealing with the use of his name. There is no end to the teaching and preaching on what constitutes misusing God's name: using his name as a curse word, swearing falsely by his name, attempting to manipulate God by invoking his name during magic or incantations, and using God's name casually, without fully considering the implications. The commandment probably alludes to all these things and more.

God gave a great gift to the Israelites when he disclosed his name, Yahweh, to them. This name, translated the LORD in most modern translations, means "I am" or "the one who always is." Taking his name lightly shows disrespect for this gift, underestimates his power, scorns his presence, and misrepresents who he is to the family of humans.

Misrepresenting God to others may be the commandment we hear the least about. It comes up repeatedly, however, in the Old Testament. In Exodus 9:16 God declared that his central concern was the declaration of his name to the earth. He entrusted his name and the task of its declaration to the Hebrews. If they failed in this trust punishment would be certain. In light of this it becomes evident why all of the traditional teachings on the third commandment listed above are correct. To use God's name as a curse word, a manipulative tool, casually, or to cover lie—all these things misrepresent who the LORD is to the world.



OBJECTIVES

- Identify the importance of names both today and in biblical times.
- Establish that God is concerned how His people represent him to others.
- Examine to see if class members are misusing God's name in their lives.
- Determine to make changes as necessary in the use of God's name.

SCRIPTURE

- Exodus 20:7
- Exodus 9:16
- Ezekiel 36:22-23

WHAT YOU NEED

- Copies of Handout #5.1 for everyone in the class
- A copy of Handout #5.2 for one reader
- Chalk/chalkboard; marker/dry erase board; or something else to write on
- Pencils/pens

Part 1 - What's in a Name?

Begin the class by distributing Handout #5.1. Allow four or five minutes for everyone to finish. Take a few minutes to go over what the class members wrote. Say **Today we're talking about the importance of names. All the names on this sheet have become stereotypes or what writers call "stock characters." Their names now only symbolize small aspects of the real people (and in some cases, not even that). They don't represent real people to us anymore. Can you name any other people's names that have become stereotypes?** Write these names on the board. After several names are on the board, write "GOD?" Ask **Do you think that God's name has lost its meaning for us?**

Ask someone to read Exodus 20:7. Ask **What is the importance of a name in our society?** (Reputation. "A person is only as good as his or her name.") **What are some important reasons to keep a good reputation?** (Leads to better interpersonal relationships, important in business transactions, etc.) Say **In the time of Exodus names were even more important. The name told you something about that person, sometimes even defining what he or she was to become. Names were so important that when persons changed sharply, they often changed their name as well.** Ask for some examples. If no one can come up with any, say **For instance after making the covenant with God, Abram changed his name to Abraham which means "Father of many nations."**

Explain **When God gave his name Yahwah to his people it was more than just a name to pray to or a way to address him. When he gave his name, which means "I am" or "the one who always," he was giving his people the essence of who he was. But just like us today, God was concerned with the reputation his name got from those who used it.**

Part 2 - Thank God!

There are a variety of teachings on the actual meaning of the third commandment. Ask the following question and write the answers you get on the board. Be sure to cover at least the four possibilities that are listed here. Ask **What have you heard or what do you think that this third commandment means?** 1) Not to use his name as an obscenity. This is one of the most common in our society. 2) Not to falsely swear by God's name, such as in a court of law. 3) Not to use God's name in incantations or magic. At the time of the Exodus it was believed that if you called on a spirit or god to do certain things with just the right words, they would be forced to do it. Today the "name it and claim it" theology of some Christians comes dangerously close to this. 4) Not to use his name flippantly as in "Well, praise the Lord!" or "Thank God!" There is nothing wrong with saying either of these, so long as they aren't empty words. Take a few minutes to go over these.

Now ask **What are some times when you are tempted to misuse the name of the LORD?** (Possible answers include times of high stress, in humor or jokes, using slang terms or words, and moments of surprise and pain.)

Part #3 -Representative of God

Have someone read Exodus 9:16. Explain **A major goal of God in the book of Exodus (and the rest of the Old Testament) was to make his name known to all the earth.** Ask **In light of this, why would it be important for the Hebrews to use God's name properly?** (One of their primary functions is to proclaim God through his name.)

Have someone read Ezekiel 36:22-23. Ask **According to this scripture, why is God going to act?** (For the sake of his holy name.) **What had the Hebrews done?** (Profaned his name to the nations.) **Had they kept the third commandment?** (No.)

Explain **God's name became associated with an unholy people. They had betrayed the trust that God had given them when He revealed His name. Through words and deeds, they misrepresented God to the world.** Ask **Can you name any modern day leaders that have misrepresented God to the world?** (Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, Jimmy Swaggert, Bill Clinton, others.) Then ask **How about us? If we claim to be Christians, we have taken the name of Christ upon ourselves. How are we portraying that name to the world?**

Part #4 - Jesus understands, or does he?

Read or have someone read Handout #5.2. After reading it ask **What are some expressions that we use that can be misusing God's name?** (Thank God, good God, thank the Lord, God forbid.)

Close the lesson with prayer. Be certain to thank God for the gift of his name.



What's in a name?

What do you think of when you hear these names? Jot down the first few words that come to your mind.

1. Don Juan

2. Benedict Arnold

3. Goliath

4. St. Valentine

5. Hercules

6. Casanova

7. St. Patrick

Jesus Understands

Bible quizzing was my life in the eighth grade. Quiz studying, practices, and competitions dominated my calendar and my time. During one quiz meet something prompted the quizmaster to ease the distress of one anguished youth with the soothing words of "Jesus understands." Although the quizmaster spoke these words with the purest intentions, my friends and I found the statement hilarious and began invoking it in every situation we faced or mistake we made. Projecting a certain "Mister Rogers" quality in our voice, we would proclaim our mantra. Miss a question? Jesus understands. Stay out too late? Jesus understands. Cheat on a girlfriend? Watch a "questionable" movie? Forget your car keys? Jesus always understood.

I thought nothing of it at the time. Surely it was one of the great theological truths of Christianity that in the life of Jesus we can honestly say that God does understand the trials and temptations that we face. However, we broke the third commandment blatantly in those days. We invoked the name of God without considering it. "Jesus understands" wasn't a statement of faith, it was merely verbal graffiti. We reduced the Crucified One to a punch line, and in so doing we misused the name of the LORD every bit as much as if we'd attached profanities to it.

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