

What's In a Name?

Exodus 20:7

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Last time I spoke here, we looked at the beginning of Ephesians 5, and one of the issues we talked about was language. That's the text where Paul says, "**Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking.**"

That was only one of my points, but it was the thing everyone wanted to talk to me about afterward. It's a major issue these days, because filthy language and foolish talk have become the defining emblems of public discourse in our society. It used to be that dirty jokes and filthy language were relegated to private talk between ungodly people, but now there's practically no word and no subject matter so vile that it is considered inappropriate for public consumption. Our culture's entertainment and casual discourse are filled with filthiness and foolish talk.

Lately, this has been a *huge* topic of discussion and debate among evangelicals: What are the limits of acceptable language? How filthy is *too* filthy and how foolish is too foolish?

What's sad is that this issue was not placed on the table for discussion by people who understand that Christians should stand out like shining lights in the midst of a wicked

and perverse generation—being known for our purity and our fear of God. But this whole issue keeps coming to the forefront because it is being pushed by people who insist that in order to reach our culture, we *must* speak the language of the gutter. It's prudish and legalistic to be too concerned about cuss words, they say. And now there's a whole subculture of evangelical preachers who think the best way to be relevant is to pepper their sermons with deliberately coarse language, crude subject matter, and lewd jokes. It seems like I encounter a fresh example of this every week. I would cite some of the worst examples for you, but I can't even find a way to describe what some of these preachers have said from their pulpits without breaching the boundaries of good taste and biblical propriety in the process.

One of the best-known examples of this involves an influential pastor who did a sermon series on the humanity of Christ in which he illustrated Christ's humanity with a lot of toilet humor. Then that same pastor did a sermon series on the Song of Solomon, and he started out with a joke about homosexuality in which he made Jesus the punch line.

Let me be clear: There should be no debate about whether that kind of thing is appropriate or not. That is not merely a breach of our duty to avoid filthy talk; that is flat-out blasphemy.

In fact, here is one of the grave dangers posed by this post-modern influx of filthy talk and foolish joking among Christians: It destroys reverence for things that are holy. Deliberately blur the line between what is filthy and what is pure, and you will soon treat everything in a filthy way. When you start making locker-room jokes about Christ from the pulpit, if a massive alarm doesn't go off in your own heart and conscience, that is a very bad sign, because "**out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks and [it is an] evil person [who] out of his evil treasure brings forth evil**" (Matthew 12:34-35).

When filthy talk and foolish joking reaches *that* point, we've gone miles past whatever gray area you might think lies between the realm of *pure* speech we are supposed to cultivate, and the filthy, foolish talk we are commanded to avoid. When a preacher is making smutty jokes with Jesus as the punch line, that is blasphemy, pure and simple. It shows an extreme lack of reverence toward things that are holy, and it reflects a spirit of gross defiance against the Third Commandment.

That is what I want to look at this morning. The Third Commandment is found in 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.**"

The commandment itself sounds simple: "**[Do] not misuse the name of the LORD your God,**" but the moral precept behind

this commandment is *very* far-reaching. As David says in Psalm 119:96: "**your commandment is exceedingly broad.**" The lessons and implications of God's law are boundless; which is why David spoke so much about *meditating* on the law. "**Your commandment is exceedingly broad.**" That's also one of the main points Jesus made in the Sermon on the Mount: the law of God is not to be interpreted in a narrow sense or limited by any wooden literal interpretation of the letter of the law. The Commandments are *broad*. Every one of them outlines a whole array of duties, and every one of them forbids a wide variety of sins. This commandment, which is short—just a single verse—is nonetheless one of the most substantial and significant of all the commandments.

Unfortunately, it is also one of the most frequently-broken commandments. While I was preparing my notes for this message, I heard a guy in my neighbor's backyard break forth with a loud string of expletives. And this guy managed in the space of two sentences to blaspheme God's name in about four different ways. And I doubt if he ever gave it a second thought.

The vain use of God's name has become part of everyday discourse in our society. Expletives and exclamations that employ the name of God used to be bleeped on network television. Now they are common fare and the censors rarely pay attention to such language. Just this week I heard some anchor-people on the news abuse God's name three times in

the space of ten seconds. That hardly raises an eyebrow these days.

Even among Christians I find that the trivial and frivolous use of God's name has become commonplace. I hear it occasionally even among members of our congregation. It's shocking, but even in Christian circles there seems to be a decreasing concern about taking God's name in vain.

In real life, most people *still* cringe and blush when someone uses one of those four-letter Saxon words our culture deems coarse and obscene in a public context. (That's why I think it's ridiculous to argue that Christians can't really communicate effectively if we don't speak that language, too.) But our culture has become so accustomed to hearing God's name misused, that the average person hardly thinks about it. "OMG" may be the single most commonly-used abbreviation in contemporary text-messaging.

Did you realize the frivolous use of God's name is an even *worse* sin than the use of coarse words and vulgarities? As shocked as you are when you hear someone use a dirty word about some body function, you ought to be *more* outraged when someone uses God's name in vain.

But this commandment involves far more than how we use language. Notice the way the commandment is stated: **"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."** That doesn't forbid us merely to *speak* the Lord's name

in vain; it forbids any wrongful appropriation or abuse of the Lord's name.

For example, when you call yourself a "Christian," you have in effect "taken" the Lord's name. You are borrowing the Lord's own name and using it as a descriptor of yourself. And of course, there's nothing wong with that, as long as you do it with the appropriate reverence and conscientiousness. I am a Christian. That is a biblical expression, used twice in the book of acts and once in 1 Peter 4:16. But if you call yourself a Christian and act in a way other than Christ would act, you have taken His name in vain. You are guilty of using His name in an empty and meaningless way. And as we are about to see, that is an especially wicked sin. Far from being a menial and trifling matter, it is a sin that God Himself marks out as serious and abominable.

Now, there are three parts to this commandment that I want to point out. First is—

1. A RESTRICTION

The restriction is explicitly stated: "**You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.**" The Hebrew word translated "take" is from a word that means "to lift up." It can also mean, "to bear, to carry, to accept, or to bring forth." To "take" the Lord's name meant to "lift it up" or to "use" it in any sense.

And to do something "in vain" means to do it with no good purpose, or to do it in an empty and meaningless way.

So to take God's name in vain means to use it in an inappropriate or hollow way. That can be done in two ways. It is done, first of all, when we use His name without any reference to Him. And it is done, secondly, when we use His name without the proper reverence for Him. Let's look at these one at a time:

People use God's name without any reference to Him all the time. Our society has turned God's name into an expletive. His name is used all the time when the speaker has no thought of Him whatsoever. His name is used as an expression of shock, as a curse, as an exclamation of disgust, as punctuation in something as trivial as a teenaged girl's text message—and sometimes even as a meaningless expletive in profane speech.

But this commandment means we are not to use God's name at all unless we are using it to speak of Him. To speak God's name in any context that makes no meaningful reference to Him is the very definition of using His name in vain, and that is a sin according to this commandment.

It's also a sin to use God's name if you use it in a way that fails to show Him appropriate reverence. Jokes about God, lighthearted references to Him in our speech, or even insincere or hypocritical invocations of His name are all a violation of this commandment.

That hits close to home, and it is very easy to be guilty of this. The preacher takes a vacation, or his ministry takes him to someplace like Hawaii or Italy, and inevitably, someone will say, "So you're suffering for Jesus this week, huh?" Ever pastor has heard that joke at least a dozen times. I cringe whenever someone says that, and not just because it's a old, trite joke. It is a subtle way of taking the Lord's name in vain. It invokes His name for the purposes of a joke, in an insincere and frivolous way. It may seem a perfectly petty thing, but according to this commandment, it is not a small sin; it is a serious one. We should never speak God's name in such a cheap and irreverent manner.

Let me give you another example, not so trivial. At the Democratic National Convention this summer, a supposedly evangelical pastor named Joel Hunter led in prayer one night. And before he closed his prayer, he stopped and addressed the audience. he said, *"Now, I interrupt this prayer for a closing instruction: because we are gathered in a country that continues to welcome people of all faiths, let us personalize this prayer by closing according to our own tradition. On the count of three, end your prayer as you would usually do . . . one, two, three"*— and he himself very rapidly said: *"in-Jesus-name"-AMEN!"*—while others said amen to Allah, or Sophia, or Hillary Clinton or Barak Obama—or whoever Democrats are praying to these days.

That was a irreverent use of Jesus' name, and an illegitimate invocation of God's name in prayer for the purposes of political correctness. He used God's name in a way that was designed to please his audience, not in a way that showed proper reverence to the God of Scripture. Frankly, I would have preferred to have an Islamic Imam leading the Democrats in a prayer to Allah than to have an evangelical pastor up there basically telling them it doesn't matter what God they pray to or in whose name they come to Him in prayer. Under the guise of addressing God in Jesus' name, he was making a political statement. That is as wrong as if he had invoked Jesus' name in a profane oath.

This is very serious business. We are not to use God's name unless we are making a legitimate *reference* to Him, and we are not to use His name unless we are showing appropriate *reverence* to Him. Either one is a misuse of God's name and is a sin according to the Third Commandment.

In other words, God has declared it a sin employ His name unless we are speaking *to* Him or *about* Him. If you are not actually speaking *to* God, or speaking *about* Him with the reverence that is due His name, then don't use His name at all. God has every right to guard the use of His name in this way.

Even in the corporate world, we understand this principle. A company's name is its trademark. There are laws that

govern the use of trademarks, and it is unlawful to employ a company name or a trademark in a way that is not authorized by the trademark owner. The trademark owner has the right to say *who* can use the trademark and *how* they can use it. And if you misuse a company's trademark, that company is entitled to collect damages.

Furthermore, if the company is big enough and the trademark is important enough, those damages can be substantial. If you work in the corporate world, and especially if you have ever done any work with trademarks or advertising, you would not even *think* of infringing the trademark of a major corporation like IBM or Coca-Cola.

And if you understand that principle, you can begin to understand what an infinitely *more* serious sin it is to take the Lord's name in vain.

There are only two proper reasons for using the name of God. One is to glorify Him; and the other is to edify others. Any other reason for invoking the name of God is light and frivolous and ought to be avoided.

So that is the *restriction* imposed by this commandment. Let me move on to my second point. If you're taking notes, the first point we looked at was a restriction. The second is—

2. A REQUIREMENT

The requirement is not explicitly stated, but there is nevertheless a *positive* requirement set forth in this verse, and it is this: The commandment requires us to sanctify the Lord's name in our hearts. If we are negatively forbidden to speak the Lord's name vainly with our lips, then we are also positively taught by this commandment to exalt the Lord's name in our hearts.

Again, this is a very broad commandment. Involved in this are a host of duties. And you won't understand all these duties if you do not understand what Scripture means when it speaks of the name of God.

God's name not merely a word. On this point the Jehovah's Witness cult is in serious error. They insist that God has one proper name, and it is the word *Jehovah*. And they insist that this, and this alone, is His proper name. They strongly object to the fact that the Hebrew name for God is translated "Lord" in most English translations of the Bible, and they insist that God should be known by the name *Jehovah*, and by that name alone. No doubt they would interpret the Third Commandment as a reference to the word *Jehovah*.

There are several problems with their views on this. In the first place, *Jehovah* is not really the Hebrew word by which God is known in Scripture. That's an anglicized version of God's name. If you transliterated it directly from the Hebrew,

it is a four-letter word without vowels—YHWH. In modern Hebrew usage it is pronounced "Yah-weh," but in Old Testament times it was not pronounced at all, for fear of pronouncing it incorrectly. When the Bible was translated into English, it was anglicized as "Jehovah" in Exodus 6:3.

The four-letter name of God is sometimes referred to as the Tetragrammaton. Again, in Old Testament times it was used as a written symbol, never spoken as an audible name—and that emphasized the ineffability of God—His unspeakable and nameless majesty.

Now there's nothing wrong with pronouncing the word *Jehovah*, or even *Yahweh*, for that matter. The Third Commandment is not about mispronouncing the name of God; it is about using God's name in vain—and these are not the same thing.

Fear of pronouncing the name of God resulted in all kinds of rabbinical superstitions. They believed it was wrong to invoke God's name in an oath or in everyday speech, so they substituted various euphemisms. Instead of speaking about God, they spoke of heaven. Instead of saying the name of God, they substituted His attributes. And Christ rebuked those very superstitions. Look at Matthew 23:16.

Jesus says, "**Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.'**" Now here's how they reasoned: Rather than swearing by God's name and

risking a violation of the Third Commandment, they swore by the Temple. But since they had sworn by the Temple rather than invoking God's name, they didn't take their oaths all that seriously. So if you swore an oath by the Temple, they figured, it was no big infraction if you broke that oath. Obviously, then, that kind of oath meant very little. So they devised a way of making the oath more solemn: they made a rule that if you swore by the *gold* of the Temple, then your oath was binding, and you would be a debtor if you broke it.

Also, look at verse 18. Here was another of these rabbinical rules about oaths: **"If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath."** Rather than swearing by God's name, they swore by the altar—the place where the sinner met God. It was wrong to swear by God's name, they said, but OK to swear by His altar. And yet, again, this had the effect of making them regard their oaths as nothing particularly solemn.

Jesus said that is ridiculous. Verse 17: **"You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?"** And verse 19:

You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

In other words, if you swear by the dwelling-place of God, or the attributes of God, or by anything that pertains to God, you have sworn in God's name.

Here's the point: God's name is more than a word.

Look now at Matthew 5:34. This is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says,

I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

Same principle. An oath that invokes God's dwelling-place, or His creation, or anything that is dear to Him is in effect an oath uttered in His name.

That makes the Third Commandment exceedingly broad, doesn't it?

Are you ready for a definition of what Scripture means when it speaks of the name of God? Here it is: God's name is that by which He is called, that by which He is made known to us, and that by which His nature and His perfections are revealed to us. That is the biblical meaning of the expression "the name of God." It's a very full concept. It involves more

than just a word; it practically embraces everything that is true about God.

So His name includes *all* His titles, such as Jehovah, Adonai, Elohim, Lord, God, and all the many titles of God given to us in Scripture. It also includes the designations of each Member of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as well as the names Scripture uses for them: Jesus, Christ, the Word, the Comforter, Abba, and all the other names by which the Persons of the Trinity are made known.

But it includes not only God's titles and names—it includes His *attributes* as well. Take special note of this. Because one of the ways the people of God today are often guilty of taking God's name in vain is by the flippant mention of His attributes. Most of us in this room would never dream of using God's name as an exclamation or an expression of anger or disgust, but we sometimes do that with His attributes, don't we? How often have you heard Christians say things like, "Mercy!" or "Goodness!" or "Gracious!" "Heavens!""? or even "My word!"

When we say things like that, we are using God's name in vain in the very same way the Pharisees did in Jesus' day. To say something like "Merciful heavens!" is in effect to invoke the name of God. And to use such an expression as an exclamation is to take God's name in vain.

Now, someone's bound to say, "that's *too* restrictive. that's legalistic." But think about it: Those *are* divine attributes,

and that is why those expressions made it into our lexicon—as substitutes for God's name. "Minced oaths," is the technical name for them. We would not use words like that in an exclamatory way except for the fact that they are substitutes for God's name. I'm not going to follow you around smacking your hands every time you say "Good heavens!" or "Holy cow!" But in light of Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees, we ought to consider why we say what we say and how we use language—and guard our tongues, right?

God's name includes not only His titles and His attributes, but also His works, His glory, His ordinances, and even His Word. We're not to speak lightly or flippantly of any of those things. When we pray "**Hallowed be thy name**"—we are formally recognizing our duty to honor God's name, all His attributes, and everything about Him that is sacred, whenever those things are mentioned.

Do you begin to see how far-reaching this commandment is?

Consider some of the specific sins that are forbidden by this commandment. It rules out blasphemy, of course.

And it rules out hypocrisy, because, as I said, if you call yourself a Christian and behave in an unchristlike manner, you have in effect taken His name in vain.

It certainly rules out cursing—and by that I mean the thoughtless invocation of God's name or his power in wishing evil upon something or someone. How often do

people flippantly pronounce damnation against anything and everyone they don't like? That practice has become a natural part of speech for some people. I'm always amazed at the atheists who claim they don't have a God to believe in. But they have a god by which to frivolously damn anything and everyone whom they don't like.

This commandment rules out swearing unnecessarily. And I don't have in mind the use of profanity. I am talking about those careless vows people often pepper their speech with, like: "I swear on a stack of Bibles." "I swear on my Mother's grave." Jesus said if you swear by that which is precious to God you have sworn an oath in His name. And he said we should avoid the casual use of oaths like that in our everyday speech.

Let me pause here to say that Matthew 5:34 does not rule out lawful oaths. Matthew 5:34 (I read it just a minute ago) says, **"I say to you, Do not take an oath at all."** In James 5:12, the apostle James wrote, **"Above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation."** Some people, including some Anabaptist sects, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and even some evangelicals, believe that rules out all oaths of any kind for the Christian. It doesn't. In context, those passages are talking about our everyday discourse—our conversation with one another. The biblical principle that governs such speech is simply to **"let**

your yea be yea; and your nay, nay." There's no need for an oath. Your word should be your bond. But *lawful* oaths—such as when you are sworn in to testify in court, or when you take an oath of office—those kinds of oaths are not prohibited in Scripture. In fact, there are times when oaths are to be sworn solemnly and before God.

But to make an oath flippantly or offhandedly is to take the Lord's name in vain—whether you explicitly invoke the name of God or not, because all oaths are solemn promises made with God as our witness.

And to swear *falsely* only compounds the guilt of the person who makes the oath. It involves the sin of lying, and the sin of taking God's name in vain in a deliberate falsehood.

So this commandment prohibits blasphemy, cursing, swearing unnecessarily, and it also prohibits any careless or insincere use of the name of God in our speech. I would include the practice of some Christians who use God's name over and over like punctuation when they pray; people who sing "God Bless America" as an expression of patriotism rather than a prayer; and preachers who say, "Bless God," or "Glory to God" as a throwaway line—like a rimshot after they tell a joke.

The Third Commandment prohibits something else as well: It forbids us to take titles and names for ourself that properly belong to God. In Matthew 23:8-10, Jesus said,

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

9 And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.

10 Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

Now obviously, he was not prohibiting the use of terms like "master" and "father" in every context. The apostle Paul addressed fathers in Ephesians 6:4, and he called them *fathers*. What this prohibits is the use of the term "father" or "master" as a title of religious veneration. Spiritually, you have only one Father, and that is God. An earthly clergyman who accepts the title *Father* is in violation of this commandment. He has taken a name that properly belongs to God alone. And he has taken that name in vain.

Now let me take this a step further: We can take God's name in vain not only through our words, but also by our thoughts and deeds. Consider this: when you pray, you pray in Jesus' name. So to pray wrongly is a violation of this commandment. That includes superficial praying, and it also includes praying for the wrong thing.

Let me say something about superficial praying. We are all guilty of this. When you stand in the church service, pretending to join in corporate prayer but allowing your mind to wander and thinking about other things, you are

taking the Lord's name in vain in an abominable way. I shudder to think of how frequently I am guilty of that sin. Whoever leads the music in GraceLife closes the singing time with prayer every week just before I go up to preach, and most of the time I find myself thinking about what I am going to say when I get up here, instead of entering into the prayer with my heart.

But I'll bet some of you are guilty of that as well. Think about how easy this is to do. We take God's name in vain when we sing praise songs without sincerely meaning what we are singing. If you find yourself thinking about how good your harmony sounds—or if you are easily distracted because you think the instruments are too loud or because someone hits a wrong note—you are taking the Lord's name in vain in your singing. And instrumentalists (not to pick on the percussion section or anything, but), when you think of your playing as a performance, or when you allow the noise you are making to drown out the words of praise, you are taking the Lord's name in vain. The practical truth in this simple commandment goes deep, doesn't it?

And think about this: when you pray without meaning, or when you recite a cursory cliché-prayer over a meal or in your morning devotions, you are taking the Lord's name in vain. And most of us do this routinely.

Not only that, when you carelessly pray for the wrong thing, you are taking the Lord's name in vain. Jesus said in

John 14:14, " **Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.**" Lots of people think that gives us a blank check to pray for anything we desire, but that is not what it means. Prayer in Jesus' name means praying for that which He approves; that which is consistent with his character; and that for which He has authorized us to pray. So if you pray in His name without regard for His will, you are taking His name in vain.

By the way, the phrase "in Jesus' name" is not a formula to be added to our prayers like magic words so that God will have to give us what we want. Praying in Jesus' name means praying for that which *He* desires. When we pray in Jesus' name, it is as if we are coming to the Father on His behalf. How dare we think we can use His name to obtain something He himself would never pray for? Think about that the next time you find yourself praying for your favorite team to win a baseball game or anything else that is frivolous or greedy. James said, "**You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.**" (James 4:3). In other words, when you pray out of sinful motives you are *not* praying in Jesus' name, even if you recite the words "in Jesus' name" as part of your prayer. If you do that, you are taking His name in vain.

This is one of the main reasons I was so uneasy with the Jabez phenomenon when that was so popular a few years

back. We had multitudes of people reciting the prayer of Jabez, praying selfishly as if a verse of Scripture were a magic formula for getting whatever we want. That is not a biblical approach to prayer. Worse than that, it involves the sin of taking God's name in vain.

Again I want to stress: This is not a petty or insignificant sin. And that brings us to the third aspect of this commandment. The first part was a restriction. ("Don't misuse the Lord's name.") Second was a requirement. ("Sanctify the Lord's name in your heart.") Now we come to—

3. A REASON

Here's the reason God gives for issuing this Commandment: **"For the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."** God Himself promises requital to those who take His name in vain. This is a sin that incurs a particular guilt. God will not dismiss it. He does not regard it lightly. And He will not look the other way when His name is taken in vain.

When God wanted to impress on all Israel the seriousness of His law, this is the principle He stressed above the rest. Listen to Deuteronomy 28:58-60 (NKJV):

If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God,

59 then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting.

60 And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you.

Notice that reverence for the glorious and awesome name of the Lord was how God epitomized obedience to the whole law in that verse. Abuse of God's name is no trivial matter. This is not an incidental sin. It is not a paltry infraction.

There is a particular evil in this sin that makes it especially abhorrent to God. Think of this: almost every other sin you can think of has some pleasure or profit in its motive. The thief steals to pad his pockets. The drunkard and the adulterer get some momentary fleshly gratification from their sin. There are passing pleasures in most sins, and Scripture acknowledges that. Hebrews 11:25: Moses made a choice **"to be mistreated with the people of God [rather] than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin."** Most sins come with a degree of pleasure, and that pleasure is one of the main motives that tempts us to sin.

But *this* sin, the sin of taking the Lord's name in vain, is a sin with no reward. There is no fleshly pleasure in it. It gratifies none of our senses. It is a sin of sheer rebellion, in which the sinner gains nothing but guilt and the condemnation of God. Its *only* fruit is divine displeasure. It

is, more than any other sin in the sinner's repertoire, a pointless and senseless defiance of our great and glorious God. It is therefore as purely evil and as thoroughly devilish as any sin could be. To give yourself over to a habit of taking God's name in vain is the sign of a heart that simply loves wickedness for the sake of wickedness.

Thomas Boston wrote,

Can any[one] say that it is the sin of his constitution; We have heard of a covetous, envious, lustful, [or] passionate . . . constitution, but of a swearing constitution, never. Is any man born with it? does the constitution of our bodies incline us to it? In many other sins the body drags the soul, but here the soul, contrary to all God's commands, makes the body its slave, and turns up the tongue against the heavens.

And yet consider how common this particular evil is in society today. The collective conscience of our society has become seared with regard to the profane use of God's name.

I recently watched a fascinating special on the History Channel featuring never-before-seen video taped by eyewitnesses of the September 11 attacks. These were tapes made by people standing at or near ground zero when the attacks occurred. What intrigued me the most were the reactions you could hear on the sound tracks of those videotapes. These people were watching the disaster up close

and in real life, and obviously they were struck with almost unspeakable horror at the atrocity that was unfolding before them. As those planes hit the buildings, and then as the buildings collapsed, it was disturbing to hear *how* people expressed their horror as they watched. Some screamed. Some just gasped. But by far the most common words that were spoken were exclamations where people took the Lord's name in vain.

Abuse of God's name has become so common in the profane speech of our day that even in a moment like that, when people ought to have been crying out to God for help and mercy, they impulsively cursed His name. Watching those videos, I have to say that hearing so many people speak like that was almost as disturbing to me as the atrocities themselves. And I say that not to minimize the monstrous evil of the terrorist acts, but to stress how utterly evil it is to blaspheme God like that.

Listen to Thomas Boston again:

[Taking God's name in vain is] like hell on earth. I said before that there is no advantage in swearing. But now I must say that they will have this advantage, that their works will go with them to the bottomless pit. The whoremonger will not get his whores there, nor the drunkard his cups, nor the covetous man his money; but the swearer and curser will still drive on his old trade, and that with improvement, through all eternity. I had once the

unhappiness to hear a great swearer, who had often been reproved and admonished, say, he would curse and swear in hell through all eternity. I thought it might be a prophecy. But why should men take the trade of the damned over their head on earth? will not an eternity be long enough to give people their fill of blaspheming the name of God, and cursing? Why need they begin so soon? there is time enough afterwards. I know nothing on earth so like a damned soul in hell, as a curser and swearer. . . . That's potent stuff, isn't it? But you know what disturbs me most as I think about the ramifications of this text? It's this: I see myself in the mirror of this commandment. Too many times I have invoked God's name lightly and carelessly. Too many of my prayers are superficial and routine. Too much of what I pray for is selfish and unprofitable. Too much of my worship is shallow and mechanical. I'm guilty of being flippant about the Lord and taking His name in vain.

There is only one remedy for those faults, and it is the remedy held forth to us in the gospel. We must repent and seek forgiveness, and look to the Lord Jesus Christ, who died to pay the guilt we incur when we take God's name in vain.

The commandment says, "**the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.**" And that is true. But the good news is that the guilt of even this sin was borne by Christ on behalf of those who trust Him. All that guilt—and it is profound guilt, damning guilt, the most sinister kind of

guilt—*all* of it was paid in full by Christ for those whom He redeems.

Christ promises to redeem whoever will come to Him by faith. And if you are in that number, thank Him for having borne your sins in His own body on the cross, and seek His power to overcome whatever habits and whatever way of life might cause you to take His glorious name in vain. And sanctify His name in your heart, until your own heart is so pained to hear His name taken vainly that this sin becomes as offensive to you as it is to the One whose name is defiled by it.