

The Ten Commandments: Posted on our Hearts and in our Homes
Does Saying God Bless America Violate the Third Commandment?
Exodus 20:1-2, 7

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Introduction to Text: After a couple of weeks of pause, we are continuing our series today on the 10 commandments. There are a couple of reasons that we should look again at these commandments. The commandments provide for us an ethical framework for all of life. Though part of the Old Testament Law, the commandments give us an ethical framework for any orderly society.

Here is the particular reason that I want us to consider these 10 commandments. This year we have isolated the theme of family as one of our central talking points. Precisely, we have learned from Deuteronomy 6 that God assigned the family the primary role of teaching the next generation to follow God. In Deuteronomy 6, God tells Israel that they are to teach these commands to their children. What commands? God gave these commands as overarching commands to lay the groundwork for the other commands.

Just to review a brief second--we said that the importance of the first commandment is that only God is to be worshipped. The focus of the second commandment has to do with the how of worship of that one true God. In other words, it is not enough to worship God; we must also make sure that we worship the one true God in a correct manner.

Today we are on the third commandment. We will read verses 1-2 as the introductory words to all of the commands and then read verse 7 which gives us the third commandment.

Text: ¹ Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.

⁷ Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God, because the LORD will punish anyone who misuses His name.

Introduction: Someone has remarked that all 10 of the commandments give us a little trouble. Some are difficult because we do not know what they mean. In other commandments, our trouble is that we struggle with how exactly to apply them in our contemporary setting. This particular commandment probably falls into the difficult category because we think we know precisely what it means and stop our application there. On the surface everybody knows that this commandment has to do with our speech right? Somebody might say this commandment tell us to stop cursing or “cussin” or using swear words. I suppose that is part of this commandment, but I want to show you this morning that it is so much more.

Understanding the Third Commandment

What is the key to understanding this commandment?

A survey of our major English translations indicates the following interpretations.

- Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God (HCSB, NIV, and NLT)
- You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, (KJV, NASB, ESV)
- You must not use the name of the Lord your God thoughtlessly; (NCV)

There are two Hebrew words at play here so the translations that have just the word “misuse” are actually not all that helpful to understanding the original meaning. Further, we have usually built our translation around the meaning of only one of the Hebrew words—the word that we would translate “in vain.” The key to unlocking the full meaning here might just be in the other word—a word that we could give a very literal translation of “take up,” “lift up” “carry” or even “wear.” So really, the key to this commandment is that we violate this commandment when we “take up” the name of God, but our taking up the name of God is “in vain.”

There is an old legendary tale about Alexander the Great. Whether true or not, I’m not exactly sure, but it sure is a good story. Alexander the Great, of course, was a powerful leader. It is said that he was the chief judge and jury on any matter that came up on the battlefield. One day a young soldier was brought to him with the charge of deserting the battle. Alexander is said to have begun the proceedings by asking the young soldier’s name. “Alexander, sir,” was the reply. Alexander the great asked more pointedly, “Again, young man, what is your name?” “Alexander, sir” again was the reply. Yet again, but with more force, Alexander asked again, “Young man, I ask you again, what is your name?” Now bewildered, the young man almost in tears says, “Why it is Alexander, sir?” Alexander the Great then said, “Well then, change your ways or change your name!”

Alexander the Great was going to have none of this business of one of his soldiers leaving the battlefield in the midst of war. In similar fashion, when we take up the name of God—when we take up the name of Christ as Christian, we take it up in vain if we do not truly honor Him in all our ways.

So, the understanding of this commandment is ...

Not in the phrase “in vain” but “take” or better yet “take up”

What is the importance of God’s name?

When we take up the name of God or wear the name of God, we represent to others the essence of who God is.

God’s name is His reputation

What is the importance of the serious warning? “He will not leave unpunished.”

This is a serious warning. Why so serious? Anybody who claims to know Christ and wears that label, but is not truly a Christ follower, cannot be saved by wearing the name.

This is Heaven or Hell.

An Application for this 4th of July Weekend

This week, as I was thinking about the 4th of July as I worked through this text. I could not help but think about all of the ways that we use God's name carelessly in reference to our country. Two phrases come to mind: "God bless America" and "In God we trust." Most Americans truly do not understand these phrases (even those who would fight for the right to use those phrases.) There is a text that I want to show you that is important to this understanding.

Jeremiah 7:1-11

¹ [This is] the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ² "Stand in the gate of the house of the LORD and there call out this word: Hear the word of the LORD, all [you people] of Judah who enter through these gates to worship the LORD.

³ "This is what the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, says: Correct your ways and your deeds, and I will allow you to live in this place. ⁴ Do not trust deceitful words, chanting: This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD. ⁵ Instead, if you really change your ways and your actions, if you act justly toward one another, ⁶ if you no longer oppress the alien, the fatherless, and the widow and no longer shed innocent blood in this place or follow other gods, bringing harm on yourselves, ⁷ I will allow you to live in this place, the land I gave to your ancestors forever and ever. ⁸ [But] look, you keep trusting in deceitful words that cannot help.

⁹ "Do you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and follow other gods that you have not known? ¹⁰ Then do you come and stand before Me in this house called by My name and insist: We are safe? As a result, you are free to continue doing all these detestable acts! ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your view? Yes, I too have seen [it]."

[This is] the LORD's declaration.

Another text comes to mind when I read this text. It is Isaiah 29:13. "The Lord said: ...these people approach me with their mouths to honor Me with lip-service—yet their hearts are far from me." Jesus used Isaiah's quote in speaking about the Pharisees.

Here's the point: "Saying God bless America" and "In God we trust" cannot be lip-service. When it is, this is a violation of the third commandment.

Pleading for God to bless America doesn't have to be taking the Lord's name in vain! However, we must realize that His blessing is related to His covenant!

God's blessing of any nation—be it America or any other comes as a result of adherence to His covenant.

So What?

If you want God to bless America, the place to start is with me. Is my heart pure? Do I adequately reflect the name of God?