

Exodus 20:7
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Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY (The Second Commandment)

Exodus 20:7 You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

Dear Friends in Christ,

GOD'S NAME – A BLESSING, NOT A CURSE

Oprah Winfrey, Rush Limbaugh, Tom Brady, Donald Trump, Barak Obama. My guess is that hardly a one of you has even shaken hands with any of these famous people, much less had an actual conversation with them. Yet, you have a pretty distinct opinion about most, if not all of them. How? You have never met them, yet you are pretty sure what you like and don't like about each of them. How can you be so sure?

The answer is so obvious as to beg the question. Of course, it is because you have heard from other people about those people. Other people have told you things those people said or did, and you have drawn your own conclusions from events and words associated with their names. Barak Obama did that; Donald Trump said this. When a name is tied to certain words or events, a name becomes much more than a name. In our minds, a name is the person himself. So when you hear a name like Oprah Winfrey or Rush Limbaugh, you don't imagine a dozen letters printed out on a piece of paper. Your mind's eye envisions a living breathing person. You think you know what that person would say about your opinions and beliefs.

God's Name Misused Is a Curse

But what if... what if people say a name and then say something that didn't actually happen? What if they are just repeating baseless rumors? Or worse, what if they are telling you calculated lies? A name is so important! That is why we have libel and slander laws. Which is exactly the problem Martin Luther had with God.

Young Martin Luther thought he was doomed, doomed to literally millions of years of painful unsleeping imprisonment, being punished for his sins by a vengeful God who would extract punishment for every sin he had ever committed. This, he believed, was the fate of even devout Christians. Luther's reason for avoiding sin was not love of God, but fear of punishment. His reason for doing nice things for people was not love of people, but the expectation of a club landing on his head if he didn't.

Even though he is in some ways a spiritual father to us, we would hardly recognize the God that Martin Luther knew for the first 30 years of his life. We may wonder how Martin Luther could have been so wrong about God! It wasn't that he had been brought up in spiritual ignorance. Luther had been baptized at one day old. From his earliest years he received a religious education which only a small minority could obtain in his day. He became a full-time church worker, even a professor of religion. How could he have been so blind to who God really is?

How? It has everything to do with the Second Commandment which says, ***"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God."***

His teachers, his priests, his professors had used God's name often. But when they used God's name, they were continually telling him half-truths and outright lies about God.

You hear it every day. You talk to people who have mistaken ideas about God. Like Luther, many people are convinced that God is only an angry judge who is going to make us pay for every mess up. Other believe that God is just like a doting grandmother who believes that her little darlings surely

could never do anything wrong, and if they do, surely shouldn't be punished. Others believe that God just doesn't care one way or another. All are lies about God.

And we Christians look at them and wonder why they don't get it. Why *don't* they get it? It basically comes down to a misuse of God's name.

On that pink piece of cardstock, one man's summary of the Second Commandment says, "*We should fear and love God that we do not use his name to curse, swear, lie or deceive or use it superstitiously.*" Using God's name in these ways, makes us guilty of libel against God.

"*Curse, swear, lie or deceive...*" We often lump cursing and swearing together. What's the difference? "Cursing" is wishing trouble on somebody. The most common example is when people wish God to damn people to hell. First of all, that is not our judgment to make. Second, God does not want his name to be used for harming, but for helping. On the other hand, "swearing" is using God's name to promote falsehood – for example perjury in a court. Forbidden "swearing" includes using his name in trivial affairs, like when people say, "I swear to God it's the truth". Don't do that. Or the much more common "OMG" that gets attached to unnumbered meaningless conversations over funny pet videos and the like. All of those uses of God's name cheapen God's name. God is disgusted when people do that. Therefore Christians don't do that.

Others attach God's name to superstitions, to un-biblical personal philosophies, to false teachings and all other sorts of lies.

How often God's name gets misused! You hear it. I hear it. Even from Christians. And if Christians say this around me, how much more must they misuse God's name when there is no clergyman in earshot. It is a sad sign of the times that even as we lament the growing godlessness of the world, we sometimes take part. It was not always this way! In the past even non-Christians would not have misused God's name in polite company. Now it has become part of everyday language even for Christians!

How grievously we have sinned against God's name.

People make their excuses. "Oh, I didn't mean it!" That is no excuse. If you didn't mean it, then why did you say it? The old Bible translation of the second commandment said, "*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.*" That was a better translation. "Don't take the name of the LORD in vain." What does "*in vain*" mean? "*In vain*" means, using God's name in a useless way, a way that has no purpose. When we pepper our language with little expletives of our God's name, even if we use the lame excuse of "I didn't mean it," God will judge that.

Others protest, "Well, I lived with a rough crowd for many years." Do you not understand that you, of all people, should not misuse his name. You are to be a light to the world, not sinking to the depths of the world.

And there are sins of not using God's name when we should. Neglect of prayer, failure to give God credit, sins that condemn you and me. Through all of them, God's name is discredited among the heathen, and dishonored in our hearts.

God would be right to punish us the second that we bring such dishonor to his name. Indeed, if anyone should think that letting fly an occasional "JC" or "OMG" is no big deal, consider this: This is the only commandment that promises God's punishment. "***You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.***" Did you get that? "You shall not steal" does not make a special mention of God's judgment. Nor does "You shall not commit adultery" or even "You shall not murder." The only commandment with a special self-contained mention of God's judgment and hatred of the sin is this one: misusing God's name. Think about that the next time you are tempted to dishonor God's name in your conversation.

Oh, God, be merciful to us!

Blessing with the Name of God

While we could talk about the abuses of this Commandment at even greater length, in the short time of this sermon we must also remember this: God gave his commandments for a positive good.

This Second Commandment does not exist simply because God doesn't like it when people disrespect him (though that would be reason enough), but because he wants his name to be a source of blessing.

When we use God's name in worthless ways, we empty it of meaning. God wants it quite the opposite. His name is to be a light shining in a dark place, a shady refuge in the heat of summer. He wants his name to be a source of joy and hope. And it can be and will be, if only we use it correctly.

Remember the reading from 2 Chronicles. King Jehoshaphat was faced with an enemy army that had snuck into his territory and was only fifty miles from his capital city by the time he found out! What could he do? First, he prayed to the LORD. Then he called all the people of his kingdom to come to the LORD's temple in Jerusalem. They fasted and prayed and called out to God. When God answered through a prophet, Jehoshaphat sent out the army. And then he did the amazing. Now let me ask you: if you were a major general sending a division into combat, whom do you put in the vanguard? Reconnaissance units? Armored units? This is what Jehoshaphat did: "*He appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army*"! Later, after their victory, the king did not forget the LORD's blessings, but led all his soldiers back to the temple in Jerusalem where they praised the LORD again.

King Jehoshaphat treasured the LORD's name. He treasured it in his time of trouble and his time of joyful success! Do we not feel in our hearts that this is the right way to use God's name? Don't we look at this wonderful example of Scripture, and aspire to use his name in such a noble way?

Watch the ten lepers draw near to Jesus. They know how to use his name. "*Jesus, Master, have pity on us!*" Is that not one of the best uses of Jesus' name?

Back in Africa nearly ten years ago another missionary and I visited a church in a remote village on the shores of Lake Malawi. The shining blue lake, the red-brown mountains lying beneath the lush tropical vegetation made the descent into the village one of the most beautiful journeys I have ever taken! The next day we drove out of the village on the dirt trail that ascends a steep mountain-side. It had just rained, so it was rutted, muddy, slippery. It is well known that over the years, several vehicles have gone over the side of the mountain and people have died. As our vehicle climbed the muddy mountain path, the driver had trouble shifting gears. The vehicle stalled. The driver engaged the brakes. Though the wheels were locked, the vehicle began to slide down the muddy mountain path backwards! My body tingled with anxiety. In the seat behind me a woman immediately began using Jesus' name—in prayer. What a great Christian faith she had! In her time of trouble and worry, she knew exactly where to turn. I felt inspired—and a little ashamed.

Is that how you use Jesus' name? It should be!

There is still the best possible use of God's name. The reading from Romans said: "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" God's name is not only a place to appeal when we are in a tight spot, or an address for our thank-you notes. God wants his name to bless people for eternity. In the name of Jesus we hear the truth spoken by the angel just before his birth: "*and you are to give him the name Jesus [which means "the Lord saves"] because he will save his people from their sins.*" (Mt 1:21). Yes, that name saves us from ourselves and the guilt of all the sins we can never undo or make up for. Trust in that name; believe in that name; hope in that name.

Let God's name be so precious to us that we guard it. When people misuse it, if you don't speak up

about it, at least give people a sour look. But better than that, let us so revere God's name that people have respect for it, not because of the sour looks we give them, but because we let them know how greatly God blesses us through his name. Amen.