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THE NAME OF THE LORD

Exodus 20:7

One Main Thing

While respect for God's name offers tremendous blessing, the misuse of his name brings fearsome consequences.

Introduction

God's name holds tremendous importance throughout Scripture. It was noteworthy when "men began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). Scripture describes Abraham's worship as calling on the name of the Lord (Gen 12:8, 13:4, 16:13, 21:33). Moses identified the chosen nation as those who "are called by the name of the Lord" (Deut 28:10). As God's nation, God's people were to proclaim (Exod 33:19), minister in (Deut 18:5, 7), praise (Psa 7:17), call on (Psa 116:4; Joel 2:32), bless (Psa 113:2), remember (Psa 20:7), fear (Psa 102:15; Isa 59:19), trust (Isa 50:10; Zeph 3:12), walk in (Mic 4:5), and love (Isa 56:6) the name of the Lord.

Those truths offer tremendous background for our understanding of Exodus 20:7 as a powerful understatement. God's people do not take God's name in vain. Rather, we honor (Psa 66:2), revere (Mal 2:5), and reverence it (Psa 89:3).

The Bible notes the importance and blessing of knowing the name of the God whom we serve. It could be argued that the best question Moses asks God in Exodus 3 is, "...[When] they say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" God's answer is not a proper noun. Rather, he offers the dynamic and engaging, "I Am Who I Am." The name of God is more than Adonai, Yahweh, Elohim, Jehovah, or any word that humans might utter. The Lord and his name, in more ways than we know, stand beyond our comprehension. And yet by revelation, God's people know his name, his character, his will, and his love.

Going Deeper

In what ways could a person "take the name of the Lord your God in vain"?

We tend to think first of overt profanity, pairing God's name with the vulgar and the crass. In addition to the passages cited above, Ephesians 4:29 and 5:4 forbid the very thought of using God's name as part of an expletive.

We also think of using God's name in frivolous ways, as

a byword. The most common current example, “Oh my god!” is so common that it is seldom typed as in this sentence. People know OMG when they read it.

Vain use of God’s name suggested by the context of Exodus 20 includes labeling as gods items or entities that are not (Exod 20:3). Things carved or molded are not God and must not be so labeled. God cannot be adequately or meaningfully represented by the work of human hands.

The Old Testament powerfully condemns taking God’s name in vain by falsely claiming to speak in his name. Jeremiah 14:13–16 offers a chilling example. Prophets claimed to speak in his name, but the Lord says, “I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision...” And the consequences of their falsity are sword, famine, and destruction. It fits our focus passage so well, “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.” From Matthew 15:7–9, quoting Isaiah 20:13, we see those who draw near to God with their lips, but not with their hearts. They teach for commandments the doctrines of men, as if those commandments came from God. They take God’s name in vain even as they offer him vain worship.

There is also a behavioral aspect of taking the Lord’s name in vain. Titus 1:10–16 describes false Christians who teach false doctrine for personal profit. The

passage concludes, "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work." They falsely claim to speak in God's name and for God's glory, but their works, including their words, deny him.

Could one take God's name in vain in the sacred act of prayer? God does not violate his word or his character. Praying contrary to God's revelation is vain, presumptuous, and counter-productive (Jas 4:13-17; Matt 26:39, 42). Praying selfishly or pridefully cannot honor God's name (Luke 18:9-14; Jas 4:1-6). The same could be said of praying frivolously or faithlessly (Jas 1:5-8).

What of "the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes his name in vain"?

This phrase stands as one of the classic examples of restraint and understatement within Scripture. It resonates with Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." It affirms Numbers 32:23, "...Be sure your sin will find you out." It supports Proverbs 13:15, "...But the way of the unfaithful is hard." Ultimately, it stands with Romans 11:22, affirming both the goodness and the severity of the Lord. Yet, we dare not affirm that God's punishment is limited to the eternal realm. Jeremiah uses fascinating language in describing the punishment of the false prophets who claim to speak in God's name and those who follow them, "...for I

will pour their wickedness on them" (Jer 14:16). Their wickedness—the wickedness that they chose and practiced. Their wickedness earned their punishment.

Application

What implications does Exodus 20:7 hold for Christians today?

We know to avoid profanity, even that which does not directly blaspheme God. We also know not to use God's name in the more classic sense of the word "profane"—to use God's name in non-sacred, unworthy, or dishonorable ways. It is neither wise nor right to use God's name as a byword. We know it is unwise to use euphemisms that disrespect Deity. Out of respect for God, we avoid golly, gosh, gee, geez, Jesus H. Christ, and the like. In keeping with Matthew 7:1–6, we start by cleaning up our own speech as needed. It may be that we need help in this process of cleanup. We can ask others to pray for us, encourage us, and hold us accountable for the wise commitments we have made.

As parents, we teach our children to avoid language that demeans God. As friends and brethren, we kindly educate fellow Christians if they use such words. We do so within the spirit of Matthew 7:12, Galatians 6:1–2, Ephesians 4:15, and James 5:19–20. We do not assume that others know all that we know. We teach by word and example in humility and love.

We exercise great caution and respect when speaking of or for God. We refuse to elevate our opinions to the status of divine revelation (Matt 15:8–9). Out of respect for the Lord we remember and practice 1 Peter 4:11, “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.” We refuse to add to or take from God’s revelation (Rev 22:18–19).

Valuing Titus 1:16 and Matthew 7:21–23, we seek strong congruence between our words and our actions. Think of the football player who unleashes a streak of insult or profanity before turning to the camera to thank his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for letting him have a great game. The praise rings hollow, even to the point of mockery. What a blessing when our lives speak of love and respect for God!

We choose to employ the wisdom of James 4:15, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” We can regularly and appropriately say, “If the Lord wills...,” acknowledging our faith in, awareness of, and submission to the Almighty.

And what happens if we find ourselves in the poor position of having used God’s name in vain? We embrace the attitude of Job from Job 42:1–6. We affirm God’s greatness, we admit our error, and we seek His forgiveness. We see that same attitude in Paul under very trying circumstances (Acts 23:1–5). What’s wrong is wrong, even when we are under stress and pressure. When we find ourselves wrong before God, we change directions.

Conclusion

As Christians we continually seek ways to show increasing respect and adoration for God. He made us in his image (Gen 1:26–27). “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). He has extended and demonstrated his love for us in the most stunning of ways (John 3:16; Rom 5:8). We owe him everything.

We recognize and celebrate God’s supremacy. We have given our lives to him. We never want to dishonor or disparage his name. We are blessed to esteem him above all. As we esteem and honor him, he draws us ever nearer to his heart.

Discussion

1. In what ways can taking the Lord’s name in vain harm the person who does so?
2. Why might some be tempted to restrict “taking the Lord’s name in vain” to overt profanity?
3. In what effective and encouraging ways have you heard others elevate and honor God’s name?
4. What blessings will be reaped by the person who excels in honoring God’s name?
5. What can we do to help one another excel in the grace of honoring God’s name?