

“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 4: WATCH YOUR WORDS!”

Exodus 20:7, Psalm 8

This morning we’re looking at the third of the Ten Commandments. It’s been a couple of weeks since the last time we considered these rules God has given us for making the most of his world, but you may recall that we have already seen that these commandments are intended as a response which people make to a liberating and loving God. For the people who first received these words – the ancient Israelites – the liberation was from the oppressive slavery of Egypt. For us today, God has liberated us from the consequences of our wrong choices and our innate sinfulness. So we are to recognise, firstly, that he is the only God and, secondly, to undertake not to limit him by trying to make an idol of him. The third commandment is to do with how we treat God’s name.

As always, to understand fully what’s going on here we need to do a little bit of background work. Basically, we can say that for the Israelites (and, indeed, most other ancient peoples) there was always a strong link between the name and the bearer of the name. You may think that’s rather obvious, but what I mean is that someone’s name is very closely linked to their character or some other notable feature of their life. Just looking at the early chapters of *Genesis*, for example, we see that “Adam” is very much like the word for “earth”, “Abram” means “revered father”, “Abraham” means “father of nations”, “Isaac” means “laughter”, and so on.

There’s also the idea in the beginning of the story of life that actually naming something implies having some kind of control over it, as when Adam names the animals in *Genesis 2:19,20*. In some societies today, using someone’s name is a privilege granted to only a few intimate friends. The way a name is used can be a measure of respect (whether you use the first name, the nickname or the title and surname). And the teachers among you will know the help it is to know someone’s name when dealing with them.

That goes some way to explaining why the Israelites never actually uttered the name of God. When reading from the Scriptures, Jews substitute the word “LORD”. The name of God in Hebrew never has the vowels put in it – it has only the consonants YHWH. In your Bibles in the Old Testament, this is usually indicated by the word Lord in capital letters. Some people put the vowels of the Hebrew word for Lord (*adonai*) into it and get “Jehovah”, but nowadays it is more often written as “Yahweh”, which is thought to be more accurate. Although the Israelites might do things “in” or “through” the name of the Lord, it was a name too holy to utter and obviously too holy to abuse. We have a Jewish friend who writes to us and she always writes “G_D” to this day. (Interestingly, my spellchecker always puts the vowels back in!) The use of the actual name was thought to involve God in the situation. *Psalm 8*, which we read just now, expresses something of the tremendous majesty of God’s name – meaning God himself.

So you can see, I hope, that if they were to “*misuse the name of the LORD their God*”, to swear to do something in his name, and that didn’t happen, it would call into question the reality of God’s existence. The misuse of God’s name meant the abuse of God himself.

There are, unfortunately, many people – even many Christians – who slip God’s name (and that now includes the name of Jesus Christ, too) into their conversation just as another expletive, like a safety valve when things get tough: as a cry of exasperation, as a term of abuse, as a sigh of relief. That’s dragging God’s name in the dirt, making it little more than a grunt or a sigh, because we just don’t think about God himself in those situations.

But it’s also something we misuse in other situations too. We can get into such a habit of using God’s name that it trips out automatically – when we say “Praise the Lord!” with no real thought of God, just a sense of relief; when we say “God bless” to someone without really stopping to think, rather than “Cheerio”. When we use – or misuse – God’s name in this way, it’s a symptom of something that’s much deeper. We are taking God himself lightly. If we don’t care how we use his name, if we don’t stop to think about what we’re saying, then we’re not really thinking seriously about God at all.

Let me suggest some areas in which that can all too easily happen – aspects of God that we take lightly along with his name. The more God’s name is heard as an expletive in the world around us, the more sure we can be that three vital features of his character are being neglected – and that goes for us as well as for the people around us who don’t have the same belief in him that we might have. I wonder if you ever challenge those around you when they misuse the name of God or of Jesus in this way. Maybe you’ve even got to the point where it doesn’t offend you at all or you don’t even notice.

1. **WE TAKE HIS JUDGEMENT LIGHTLY**

Using God’s name lightly, misusing it in our ordinary conversation, even in our worship, ignoring or taking for granted those things that are most holy means that we are unaware of the way in which God views us. I’m sure you don’t like it when people make jokes about you or talk about you as if you’re not there, or use your name to give legitimacy to something that you don’t agree with. God’s not too impressed either, when we treat him like that, either deliberately or unknowingly. *Hebrews 10:26-31* gives some idea of the seriousness of neglecting God and his righteous judgement, of disregarding the importance of him and his character.

When we glibly use God’s name – either as an expletive or to appear somehow rather spiritual or to give some kind of legitimacy to an enterprise that is completely at odds with his will (blessing bombs, for example) – do we ever pause to think that the God whose name we are abusing is sitting in judgement over us and is prepared to punish us for our ingratitude and thoughtlessness?

2. **WE TAKE HIS SALVATION LIGHTLY**

This is really the other side of the same coin, but a trap you may fall into after you’ve been a Christian for a while. We take it all for granted. You have at some stage acknowledged your sin and your need before God, you have committed your life to him – and then you’ve gradually drifted away from God and from his will for your life. He’s no longer a great and holy God who seeks your obedience and loving response to his mercy – he’s just another casual word on your lips, another casual aspect of your life.

The *Letter To The Hebrews*, from which I quoted just now, wasn’t written as an evangelistic tract to non-Christians – it was written as an urgent warning to Christians who were slipping back into their old ways, downgrading Christ’s sacrifice, and treating their salvation lightly. Look at some other words from that letter – *Hebrews 2:1-3*. Using God’s name casually is taking our salvation casually and failing to live as God wants us to.

In our communion services, in our prayers, in our songs and our readings, we regularly remember the sacrifice that Jesus made to enable us to be reconciled with God. What he did on that cross wasn’t a casual gesture, it wasn’t something he did lightly and without thinking. He agonised about it the night before. When he called out “*My God, my God!*”, that wasn’t a cry of futility or frustration: it was a real shout of despair to his God. And it wasn’t something that God the Father allowed to happen lightly, either: it was an event that had been planned from eternity. Don’t throw it all back in the face of God by your casual and thoughtless bandying about of his name.

3. **WE TAKE HIS POWER LIGHTLY**

There’s a worship song by Noel Richards which some of you may know. It goes like this:

*There is power in the name of Jesus,
We believe in His name.*

*We have called on the name of Jesus;
We are saved! We are saved!
At His name the demons flee.
At His name captives are freed.
For there is no other name that is higher
Than Jesus!*

*There is power in the name of Jesus,
Like a sword in our hands.
We declare in the name of Jesus,
We shall stand! We shall stand!
At His name God's enemies
Shall be crushed beneath our feet.
For there is no other name that is higher
Than Jesus!*

That's sound, biblically-based stuff. Jesus told his followers to cast out demons in his name. The early evangelists preached, "*Call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.*" There's power in that name. My old Sunday School teacher advised us, when we felt the Devil trying to tempt us, to say, "In the name of Jesus, leave me alone!" Those who have had any dealings with the world of the occult will tell you that the name of Jesus is held in very high respect amongst other spirits. There's power in the name!

And if God's name is just another swear word for you, you're saying that the power behind that name is no greater than the power behind any other swear word. We end up ignoring God's power, the power of Jesus' name, and if it does manifest itself, we explain it away. It's the same kind of reductionism we were talking about when we looked at turning God into just another idol. We've lost any sense of his transcendence, any sense of awe in his presence, any awareness that he can act outside the boundaries that we've set for him.

In story of Pentecost in *Acts 2*, the disciples had received the power of Christ through the Holy Spirit of God, yet the onlookers who had a casual attitude to God's power, who had reduced him to what they could cope with, tries to explain that manifestation away. They said the disciples must be drunk (*Acts 2:13*). But Peter in his sermon, preached in response to that, really lets them have it, and in the end they are so desperate to know more (*Acts 2:37*) that they are crying out "*What shall we do?*" They came to see that their attitude to the name of God – they were all good Jews, we assume, because they'd travelled great distance to be in Jerusalem for the festival – was essentially casual, because it ignored the power behind the name.

Are you taking God's power lightly – ignoring it, neglecting it? Are you using God's name but separating it from the very real power that lies behind it, that goes with it? What happened to those first apostles can happen to us again today as we once again recognise God's holiness and then begin to take seriously his judgement, his salvation, his power!

"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens."

(Housegroup notes on next page)

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For the Israelites (and many other ancient peoples), there was a very strong link between the name and the bearer of that name. Most Old Testament names tell us something about the character or role of the person. The name of God was too holy to pronounce (in the Hebrew there are no written vowels in the name) and often the word LORD is substituted. Jewish people today never write the name of God. Misusing God's name was tantamount to abusing God himself.

Many people, even many Christians, use the name of God or Jesus Christ as an expletive in their everyday conversation. We need to be wary of using God's name without thinking what we are really doing – as in "Praise the Lord!" and "God bless". Using God's name lightly ("*in vain*") means taking God lightly and can mean that we neglect three vital aspects of his character.

1. We take his judgement lightly.

God is a holy God and his name is holy. When we misuse his name we are showing that we have lost our awareness of his holiness and his judgment. Look at *Hebrews 10:26-31*.

2. We take his salvation lightly.

This is the other side of the coin, but we can easily fall into the trap of taking God and his love for granted. The great salvation of God, gained through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, is not something to be taken lightly. Look at *Hebrews 2:1-3*.

3. We take his power lightly.

There is power in the name of Jesus, as he expressed when he commanded his followers to cast out demons in his name. If we take the name lightly, we are taking the power lightly and in the end we have no real awareness of the potential of our deeds done in Jesus' name. We can even get to the stage of trying to explain away the things that are manifestations of God's power in our lives and in the lives of others (as happened in *Acts 2:13*).

Questions for discussion

1. Do you actually notice any more when people around you are blaspheming? Does the use of certain expressions make you more aware or annoyed than the use of others?
2. In what ways do we as Christians misuse God's name?
3. Even if we don't take God's judgement lightly, we still tend to put it at the back of our minds. Why do you think that is? How much emphasis should we put on God's holiness and judgement in our evangelism?
4. What can we do to prevent ourselves taking God's salvation lightly?
5. Do we really have a mandate to do works of power in the name of Jesus (e.g. healings, exorcisms, "signs and wonders", etc.)? Why/why not? If we do why do we not see more of it happening?