

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 30, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

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.”

TEN STEPS TO THE GOOD LIFE
(3) HOW TO TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY

We have seen how God must get first place in my life. Then we saw how to get the right picture of God. And today I want to tell you how to take God seriously. Exodus 20:7 gives us the Third Commandment:

“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the
Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.”

Now, what’s the big deal? What’s so special about God’s name that misusing it is the subject of one of the Ten Commandments? “Don’t misuse My name,” God says. The Hebrews believed that your name represented your character, your personality. And God’s name is God’s character. And if you’re going to learn to be serious with God, you’ve got to learn how to use His name correctly.

1. So first of all, let’s look this morning at some ways in which we often misuse God’s name. In Isaiah 52:5 God says, “All day long My name is constantly blasphemed.” Pretty awful, isn’t it?

a. We often misuse God’s name by using it to insult. When we think of this commandment we usually think of profanity or swearing or cursing. Webster says that swearing is “treating something sacred with abuse, contempt or irreverence.” How many of you would agree that our society is prevalent with profanity? It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? Books, records, magazines, movies, videos, TV shows -- everybody. The comedians are basically garbage mouths today. You get people like Joan Rivers, or Eddie Murphy, or Richard Pryor, and they can’t utter a sentence without taking the Lord’s name in vain. And they all think it’s very funny.

Now, for many people, swearing is a lifestyle. They can’t talk without cussing. Do you know what amazes me? It amazes me that people who never pray, never go to church, never read the Bible, people who deny God, cannot speak one sentence without using His name! It’s “God this,” or “God that.” Have you ever noticed how many things hell gets compared to?! “It’s as cold as hell” (that’s bad theology). “It’s hot as hell” (that’s better theology). “It’s as windy as hell.” “It’s raining like hell!” Everything is compared to hell!

Now, why do people use God’s name to insult? I think they do it because they are

insecure. “Profanity,” as someone has said, “is weak people using strong words.” You know, it doesn’t take any IQ at all to cuss. Any idiot can swear. You can teach a parrot to swear fluently. It’s a cover-up for insecurity. “I am macho blankety-blank”; and people say, “Wow man, he’s a mean one!”

I think it is also a lack of emotional control. People usually swear when they’re uptight, or frustrated, or angry. Somebody cuts you off in traffic, you stub your toe, you hit your thumb, the waiter spills something and you just blurb out “mad dog” backwards! It’s a lack of emotional control. We use God’s name to insult others.

b. We misuse God’s name to indulge ourselves. God gets used as an excuse many a time. Someone says, “I feel that God is telling me to skip church today”! I heard about one woman who said, “I don’t go to church every Sunday. I just go when God tells me to”! Or someone else says, “I don’t feel that God wants me to help out,” Poor God gets blamed for so much! We justify our own desires. God is a pushover. “I know it’s wrong, but I know that God will forgive me.” That’s misusing God’s name.

c. We misuse God’s name to intimidate. Some people are real pros at this! They use God, as it were, to back up their weak argument. They bring God in to reinforce their opinion, or to manipulate other people. You’ll hear people say things like “God told me to give you this message.” And we say, “Well, who wants to argue with God?!” Or they’ll say, “God has revealed to me what’s wrong with you”! I’ve often wondered, “Why doesn’t God just tell me directly?” I pray. “God told me that unless you do what I tell you, you’re sinning.” We use God to intimidate people. It’s as if they have received a handwritten note that says, “Thus saith the Lord; this is for you.” Now in society when you take someone else’s name, and use it for your own purpose, that’s called forgery. If you sign someone else’s name on a check to get money you don’t have, that’s forgery. I wonder how many spiritual forgers there are around who are using God to manipulate other people and to get their own desires? “If you don’t send me the four million dollars I need, I just know the Lord will take me home!” Good old Oral is still hale and hearty, and enjoying his three palatial homes in Tulsa, Beverly Hills and Palm Springs! Many people are hurt and turned off because they have been intimidated by the misuse of God’s name. Parents sometimes get frustrated by their child’s disobedience, and when nothing else works, they will burst out with, “Well, God will get you for that!” That’s misusing God’s name.

d. Sometimes we misuse God’s name in order to impress people. Have you ever met someone and at once you say to yourself, “This guy is trying to impress me with how spiritual he is”? There are spiritual showoffs! They want you to count how many times they say, “Praise the Lord”! And you get this constant patter of religious clichés — “Bless God! Glory! Hallelujah! Thank-you Jesus!” And you know their mind isn’t even there! It’s in neutral. Now of course we should praise the Lord. But don’t make God a cliché, where you just use His name as a filler in a conversation. Somebody says, “You know my husband just got a wonderful promotion, praise God!” And you think to yourself, “My husband didn’t get the promotion he was up for.”

e. We can use God’s name impulsively. That’s when we use God’s name as a reaction to something, like when you react by using God’s name when somebody says, “I’ve just caught a 10-pound fish!” and you say, “Good God, that’s great!” Somebody says, “Susie’s getting

married,” and you say, “My Lord, at last!” “I just split my pants!” “Oh, my God!”

They tell a story in Ireland about a prim and proper young Episcopalian curate who was taking part in a play that was to be given by the young people in the parish hall. And in the course of the play the curate was to be shot at close range, and he was to put his hands to his breast and groan, “Oh my God, I’m shot!” This however was altogether inappropriate language for the curate, so the director compromised and allowed him to say, “Oh my goodness, I’m shot!” When the night came for the play to be staged, some of the young people got a gun that would make a loud bang, but which would also shoot red ink! So, the great moment came; the fatal shot was fired, and the curate said, “Oh my goodness, I’m shot!” Then looking down he exclaimed, “Oh my God I am shot!” That, folks, is misusing God’s name impulsively!

Remember, God is not an exclamation point. The Bible says, “Those who honor Me, I will honor, but those who despise Me will be disdained” (1 Samuel 2:130). When you honor God’s name you take Him seriously.

2. How can you take God more seriously? Look at Colossians 3:17 -- “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” A Japanese girl said to a visiting American one day, “Americans must be very religious.” And he said, “What makes you say that?” and she said, “Well, I see all your movies, and they’re always mentioning God’s name” -- misusing God’s name. How do you take God more seriously?

a. Be sincere when you worship. Think about what’s happening. Concentrate on the Lord. Look at Psalm 29:2, “Give to the Lord the glory due His name; worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness.” That just means -- true worship focuses on God, not on what other people are wearing, not on how well or how poorly the pastor preaches, not on how well the choir sings, or what the temperature is. True worship focuses on the Lord.

So, we must concentrate on Him. In Isaiah 29:13 God says, “These people worship Me with their lips,... but their hearts are far from Me.” God is saying, “Don’t just go through the motions.” When you go to church, don’t “play church.” Really focus on the Lord. How often have we found ourselves singing the hymns in church, and our mind was a million miles away? You weren’t even thinking about the words. Or you bowed in prayer, and someone is praying, and you’re thinking about the football game! And so, worship can so easily become a ritual. How often have you sat and listened to the exposition of God’s Word, and your mind was just in neutral? You never really do that, do you? -- not in this church! God says, “Don’t play games with Me! Be serious, be sincere in your worship. Don’t just give Me lip service, but really worship Me with your heart, your mind, and your strength.” When we gather to worship, we put on the back burner what happened last week; we forget what we’re going to do this afternoon; and we focus in on God.

Look at our Lord’s words in Matthew 6:7 (Good News Bible) - “When you pray, don’t use a lot of meaningless words as the pagans do.” He’s saying, “Don’t just mouth those trite phrases and clichés.” Do you know that saying “Praise the Lord” can be misusing God’s name if you don’t mean it? Isn’t it significant or sinister to recall that Jim Bakker named his club “The P.T.L. Club” - the Praise the Lord club? If he had really praised the Lord, would he be where he is

today? I think not.

You can say, "It's a perfect day for our family picnic, praise God"; but if you don't really in your heart thank God for the good day, you're misusing God's name. You might not be truly grateful. Maybe it was just a cliché. It wasn't a swear word, but you didn't really mean it from the heart.

He says, "Don't use any meaningless words."

Let me give you an illustration of what I mean. You come home from work one evening, tired and hungry, and a tantalizing aroma from the kitchen greets you at the door. The rolls are smelling great, there's hot apple pie just out of the oven, and roast beef and potatoes. Your wife once again has fixed you a perfect meal. What do you do? Do you say, with your eyes rolling in your head, "Praise the wife! Glory! Hallelujah! Praise the wife!!" I have an idea she will appreciate it a little more if you'll say, "Honey, you've made my favorite meal. I love roast beef, I love fresh rolls, I love apple pie; and you're such a good cook. I appreciate the time you took getting this all ready." Be specific. Now, I'm not saying, "Don't praise the Lord!" But I am saying that so many people say the words with their mind out of gear; and they just think they're being so spiritual by exclaiming, "Praise Jesus! Hallelujah! Thank You, God. "Oh Lord." And half the time they don't even think about what they're talking about. You say to them, "Why do you praise God?" "Well, I just praise the Lord." If you praise the Lord sincerely, then do it all you want, but be sincere in your worship.

b. Be selective with your words. Watch what you say. Guard your mouth. Control your tongue. Look at what Jesus says in Matthew 12:36 -- He says, "I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken." I don't know about you, but that is not one of my favorite Scripture verses!

"Every careless word..." I've said a few careless words in my lifetime. I think we ought to guard against swearing, but I think we should also guard against slang. Have you ever stopped to consider the origin of the slang you use? -- where it comes from? You know, slang is just a shorthand form of swearing. It is a substitute for the stronger stuff.

We say, "Dad gum it" instead of "God damn it"; or "Judas Priest" rather than "Jesus Christ"; "heck" rather than "hell"; "darn" instead of "damn"; "gosh" in the place of "God." Professors of language inform us that as history went along, "God" became "By Gad," "by golly," "by gum." "Jesus" became "Gee," "Gee whiz." Instead of "Christ" came "Cripes," "Jiminy Christmas," "Beepers Creepers," and "for crying out loud!" "G" is the first letter of "God," and the first syllable of "Jesus." So when we say "Gee," we're saying "Jesus." "Gosh" is "God" with the final letter shaded.

You say, "Well, I don't mean anything by that!" But that's the point; you don't mean anything by that. And God says, "My name is too holy to just be used by not meaning anything by it."

How be if I said this to you, "My dear people, I can't remember where the heck I put my

darn sermon notes. Jeez, that makes me mad, gosh darn it all!" Now, I didn't swear, but you got the message! What am I saying? Watch your slang, because a lot of slang is just a cop-out for taking the Lord's name in vain.

Remember — the tongue is not the problem; the heart is the problem. Look at Luke 6:45: "For out of the overflow of a man's heart, his mouth speaks." What comes out comes from the heart. It's just like the computer word -- "Garbage in; garbage out." What goes in is going to come out, inevitably.

It's hard to keep your language clean in today's society, because your subconscious is constantly bombarded by profanity in movies, videos, books, magazines, friends at work, friends at school, even bumper stickers. I believe that Christians are too compromising when it comes to profanity. I think we sit and put, up with it on television, and I know the excuse; I hear people say, "I just don't let it bother me." But it bothers God, and it bothers Him so much that in Leviticus 24:16 He says it is worthy of the death penalty: "Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name (of God) he must be put to death." It's serious; it's not funny, no matter what the comedians say. Whatever you allow into your mind is eventually going to come out. God says, "Don't misuse My name." "Those who honor Me, I will honor, but those who despise My name will be disdained." It's serious. If you're a parent, you should review the albums of your kids. You are naive if you think that there isn't porno rock out today. Listen to what your kids are listening to and see if that's pleasing to the Lord. Be sincere when you worship; be selective with your words.

c. Be steadfast in your walk. Make sure that your lifestyle matches what you say you believe. Make sure that your talk is consistent with your walk. Make sure that what you profess comes out in your personality. Make sure that what you do does not contradict what you say you believe.

Look at 2 Timothy 2:19: "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness." What does that mean? Just this: "If you're going to call yourself a Christian, you had better act like one; because if you aren't acting like one, you're taking the Lord's name in vain." When I say I'm a believer, and I act in another way, I'm misusing God's name. Look at what Titus says (1:16): "They claim to know God, but by their actions, they deny Him." And Jesus said it like this: "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and yet don't do what I say?" (Luke 6:46).

Is your lifestyle ever inconsistent with your label? How do you take God seriously? By being sincere in your worship, by focusing on Him. You don't just play games, and put your mind in neutral, and think about the stock market. And then by being selective with your words, by watching what you allow into your mind, because what goes in is going to come out. And by being steadfast in your walk, because too often we're just simply inconsistent, and don't practice what we preach.

Now, let's face the facts, folks. The truth is that one way or another we've all misused God's name. That's the bad news. The good news is that God wants to forgive us. He wants to wipe the slate clean, and He says, "Let's have a tongue cleansing, a heart cleansing. Let's start

over.”

Look at Acts 4:12 and see how powerful the name of Jesus is! “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Friends, there’s one way to heaven and only one. I didn’t say that; God says it. Jesus said, “I am the way.” He didn’t say, “I’m one way; I’m a good way; I’m the best way; I might be the way.” He said, “I am the way.” That may appear to be narrow, and it is. People say, “There are many roads, and all roads lead to the same place.” That’s like saying, “I can go into a phone booth and dial any phone number and get home.” No. There’s only one number that will reach home, not many numbers. God says, “There is no other name by which you can be saved except the name of Jesus.”

Look at John 20:31, “...Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing in Him you may have life in His name.” Listen also to Romans 10:13: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” God says, “I will save you if you will call on the name of Jesus.” Would God lie? Of course not. He has no reason to lie.

I’m trying to say again this morning that the Ten Commandments were given not to restrict us, but really to liberate us. They were given to teach us how to live. You put God first in your life; you don’t have any idols; you get a true picture of God; and then you take God seriously. He says, “If you honor Me, I will honor you.” There is life and power and healing in the name of Jesus. There are miracles in His name. There is peace and joy in His wonderful name!

Maybe someone is saying, “But, Pastor, I have a hard time with my mouth.” Perhaps someone has a habit of swearing. How do you break that bad habit? Well,

(1) You admit it to God. You tell God you’re sorry. You confess that you’ve misused His name, and you ask for and accept His forgiveness.

(2) Then you commit the problem to God. You say, “Lord, I’ve got a problem, a habit I can’t break.” James 3:8 says, “No one can tame the tongue by his own power.” In fact, the Bible says if you get control of your tongue, that’s a mark of spiritual maturity. So, since the fruit of the Spirit is self-control, you trust God to give you control.

(3) Then you begin to control what you allow into your mind, and you walk away from those situations where you don’t have to listen to garbage. You say, “I will not put up with someone taking my Lord’s name in vain.” And don’t be compromising. Don’t say, “It doesn’t bother me,” because it does bother God.

(4) And then you begin to practice His presence minute-by-minute. You see, the Bible says that when you become a Christian, Christ comes into your life. That means that He is with you. Do you want to misuse His name in His presence? No. And the more you become aware that Jesus is with you every moment, the less you’ll be likely to say things that will grieve Him.

AMEN.