

West Valley Church
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Urban Legends *Exodus 20:7*

“Do not take the Lord’s name in vain means don’t swear.” (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. (Exodus 20:7, niv)

Good morning, everyone, it really is great to be with you today. My name is Dan, and I am the youth pastor here.

I may be a pastor now, but I wasn’t always, in fact I wasn’t always a Christian either. I didn’t start following Jesus’ teachings, or really start attending church, until high school. And at that point the learning curve of church life was steep, especially the language.

I still have a problem trying to translate and understand Christian terms and words, and don’t get me started on the acronyms, our denomination seems to love acronyms. We have an amazing building and ministry center titled the Global Ministry Center; doesn’t that sound awesome?

But what do we do to it? What do we call it? The GMC. What a shame. And there are some acronyms I still don’t even know the meaning of, like DAB, what is that? All I know is that when I plan district camp, I can’t make them mad, they might toss me O-U-T.

Christian culture and language is interesting. One thing I found interesting when I started attending church, and still find interesting today, is all the substitutions used.

I’m talking Christian cuss words; anyone know what I’m talking about? There are two hilarious YouTube videos on Christian Cuss words that I would love to share with you, but unfortunately don’t have the proper permissions to do so.

Some of my favorites from these videos are: Song of Solomon on a Sunday, or Lauren Daigle on a bagel, or Mother Pharaoh, or even well, shut the lion’s mouth and call me Daniel. We’ve all heard these things, little phrases used to skirt around swearing or using the Lord’s name in vain.

Today we are continuing in our Urban Legends sermon series, and today, we are talking about words. We’ll be looking at Exodus 20:7 and if that verse is talking about swearing or if God is addressing something a little more serious.

Let’s look at our verse for this morning, 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.”

Our discussion on Christian cussing had a purpose, it was not in vain. How many of you have heard this urban legend that this verse, the third commandment, refers to using God's name as a curse word? Yeah? I've heard that too, and believed it. And why wouldn't we?

It makes total sense, taking this verse at face value. But once you dig a little deeper, this verse, this commandment is talking about so much more than cussing, Shadrach or otherwise.

The New International Version translates this verse using "misuse" – you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God – which I think is a pretty fitting translation. Other translations have used "wrongful use", "irreverently", "profane", and most commonly, "vain".

The word in question can also be translated as falsehood or lying, don't lie about God, or commit falsehood in God's name. And that is a pretty good translation to use in this context. (Croteau and Yates pg. 37) And those words tie into misuse.

I did hear this verse after I became a Christian. I don't think anyone used it to call me out, but they very well could have. I do remember one particular instance of someone using this verse though.

I remember my grandpa telling me a story of his days as a boy scout leader. On one particular scout trip, the troop was hiking through the Santa Cruz mountains when they came across a huge banana slug. Banana slugs are pretty common in that area, it's even the local university mascot. Still, the sight of this banana slug was shocking to one of the scouts, who let out a loud "oh my god!" And my grandpa, being the very matter of fact person that he is, took time to pause and really dissect the situation. "Really, Alex?" My grandpa asks. "THAT'S your god? That is who you worship?"

I'm sure Alex was just as confused as I am. Those types of situations aren't what this verse is talking about.

Misuse is a better word, because it goes beyond just swearing or taking oaths, another urban legend regarding this verse. And because we already see God's name used in oaths, some passages show that swearing in God's name "in a truthful, just and righteous way" brings God's blessing upon the people.

For example, Jeremiah 4:2 says:

"And if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the Lord lives,' then the nations will invoke blessings by him and in him they will boast."

Jeremiah 12:16 says:

And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, 'As surely as the Lord lives'—even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal—then they will be established among my people.

In Deuteronomy. 6:13 we read:

Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.

And we see this even in the book of Psalms in Psalm 63:11:

But the king will rejoice in God; all who swear by God will be glorified in him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced.

All are prime examples of God's name being used in oaths, people swearing by God's name.

It's also important to note the contexts of each of those verses, and how each instance brought honor to God's name, or instructs us to bring honor to God's name when we bring up God's name. Not only do these verses mention honoring God, but they mention how others will be **blessed** by swearing in God's name.

A stark difference from the end of our verse, "for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

So, to recap, if our verse today was really just about swearing by or using God's name in oaths, then we'd have a lot of issues when we come up against verse of people doing just that, not only swearing by God's name, but peoples and lands being blessed by swearing in God's name. If swearing in God's name was completely out of the question, these people and land would have been cursed, not blessed.

This verse is deeper.

This commandment isn't telling us not to swear or use God's name as a swear word, but instead, to **not** use God's name in order to commit evil, to not use God's name as some sort of stamp of approval of your misdeeds.

To do that would be a misuse of our relationship with God. It even goes further than that, using God's name inappropriately to cover ill will, or for self-interests, or for any other type of harm or evil, would be misusing God's name. Not only God's name, but also God's character, as those who witness, those who see, hear, or read, the ill will, self-serving behavior, or harmful deed, may start to wonder, is THIS really what God is like?

Not just today, this is true for when this text was written. Remember, the Ten Commandments were given directly to Israel, and God is the one living reality to Israel. So, to use the name of God inappropriately, carelessly, selfishly, or with ill will, would call into question the very existence of God. (Cole pg. 165)

The Ten Commandments is a part of another covenant between God and God's people. Israel is learning more about who God is, and with what all took place in Egypt, the whole world is learning who God is. With that, Israel needs to represent God and God's character accurately.

And that is the issue, that is the problem that is being addressed. Sure, using God's name as a cuss word, not ideal, but misusing God's name, connecting God to things God is not, bringing God's character in to question by your words, your social media posts, your actions; now that, that's a pretty big deal.

Especially if someone who doesn't know God sees you doing that, and then thinks that your portrayal of God or a follower of Jesus is accurate, that's a big problem, and honestly, a problem that seems to be getting bigger and bigger these days.

When we tell someone that God has told us that they need to do something for our own personal gain, that is misuse. When we attach God's name to our preferred politician, that minimizes who God is, that misrepresents God's kingdom and character, when we attack people with our words (in person or online) while using God's name or quoting God's word, we again misuse God's name, we misrepresent what God is all about.

Situations like this can be painful, hurtful, spiteful, vengeful, a whole bunch of things that God is not. They can do real damage to believers and non-believers alike.

My dad died the summer before my freshman year of high school, the very same summer I became a Christian. There were a lot of well-meaning people who said some really bizarre things to me during that time, but one was most confusing.

My parents divorced and my mom remarried when I was young, so I have a stepdad named Frank, and Frank is awesome. When my dad died, someone I love and trusted told me that God had taken my dad so that Frank could be my dad, and that this person was going to call Frank my dad from now on.

I was 14, brand new Christian. Knew who Jesus was and that Jesus loved me and that was about it. I heard that statement, and it did not connect with the experience I had just had with Jesus earlier in the summer.

Can you imagine the thoughts I was thinking? Is this really who God is? Is this the very real person that I had just encountered for the first time? Is this what God is like?

Look, God can do whatever God wants. If God wants to rearrange any part of my life, fine. But we have four things to draw on to help us figure out or get an idea of what is actually happening.

First, we have Scripture. Scripture tells us all about who God is and what God is like. We also have church tradition, and our own experience and reason to draw on. Google Wesleyan quadrilateral when you get home.

These tools help us understand who God is and what God is like, we can read about God and scripture, and because God is a living God and has a relationship with us, we can draw on our own experiences with God to better understand who God is. To be clear though, scripture is weighted heaviest when learning who God is, it is the one to draw on more than the other three.

Reading Scripture, and drawing on church traditions, or our own experiences and reason help us get a better understanding of who God is, and who God isn't. Because as we've covered, people do in fact misuse God's name, and we need to be able to recognize the truth.

What I heard that day just wasn't lining up.

Misrepresenting who God is does real and significant damage. We're not talking about what you yell when someone cuts you off, we're talking representing God in a way that does not demonstrate God's incredible love for us.

You've heard Pastor Mike talk about keeping verses in context, in the situations they were written in. This is important, because the Bible is a story. And there's always a main point to a story, and the Bible's main point is love. That's what it's all about, always has been and always will be. The Bible is a story of God's love. The entire Bible, beginning, middle, and end.

I remind us of that because that is also what we need to represent as Christians, we need to reflect God's love in our community, in all that we say, in all that post on social media, and in the way we act.

If God is love, then that is what WE need to be.

I am not saying the Bible is incorrect, or that this verse is incorrect, that is not what this sermon or this series is. There are some popular verses that are either taken out of context or misunderstood, and it is important to understand what is really being communicated in these verses.

And what is being communicated in this verse is that "If God's name is used in an oath, (or in any way), it is to be invoked in love and reverence and in sincerity and truth." (Pokrifka pg. 222) "The third commandment calls us to honor God with our very existence, with our speech and actions, and with our motivations." (Pokrifka pg. 223)

This commandment addresses us all with an urgent call to speak and live in keeping with the one whose name we bear." (Pokrifka pg. 222)

To do the opposite, to disregard the one whose name and image we all bear, to falsely describe God's character, through our words or our actions, would be disrespectful to God, and like we talked about earlier, has the potential of pushing non-believers away.

When questioned, Jesus told us that the greatest commandment was to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind. We are to love God in all that we do, in all that we say, in all that we think! And to also love our neighbor, that is what we are here to do.

Whew, and people say the Old Testament is irrelevant. You don't believe that, church, do you? You know the Old Testament is full of relevance, it too tells the story of God's love, and helps us respond to God's love, and helps us understand and respect who God is and avoid representing God poorly.

Yes church, do not misuse the name of the Lord your God, do not use God's name for selfish gain, in any sort of ill will, or to do any harm. Do not misrepresent God's name and character, and do not lead others astray.

How do we do that, how can we make sure that we do not misuse the Lord's name?

By making sure that we are loving in all that we do and say.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 says:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but

do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Without love we are nothing, without love we gain nothing, because GOD is love and GOD is everything. Without God we are nothing.

And that is the meaning behind the phrase you've heard your entire life.

Do not take the Lord's name in vain.

Do not misuse the God's name by being unloving in speech or in action, especially in front of a new believer or a non-believer who could be lead astray by your words or actions.

Be love, for God is love.

I'd like to pray for us one more time, and then after I do, Pastor April will offer a benediction.

Let's pray.

References:

Christian Cussing YouTube videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0F6BLFavf5A>

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Cole, R. A. *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*. IVP Academic, 2008.

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