

**Foundations: The Third Commandment**  
**Deuteronomy 5:11 (AFBC 9/4/16)**

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.” (Deuteronomy 5:11)**

Or to put this another way, “We had better not use God’s name in a silly or disrespectful way because God won’t like it!” Soooo... if God is that sensitive about HIS name, I guess it’s no wonder that we get so sensitive about OURS—right?

But is this really what the third commandment means--don’t offend God by getting his name wrong or using it in a disrespectful way?

**1. WHAT’S IN A NAME?** That’s the question Romeo poses outside Juliet’s window: “What’s in a name? ...A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Romeo learned a tough lesson!

People get real sensitive about their names--if you misspell it or mispronounce it, or, God forbid, forget it! Most of us are able to remember about two hundred names and faces—as in recognizing and connecting the two.

Some people can remember more than that if they have regular contact with those persons in a setting where they are required to use those names. Maybe we shouldn’t take it so personally if someone happens to forget our name.

When your name is Thomason, you get Thompson or Thomas, or if you live in Virginia, as we did for nine years, you often get Tomlinson--the woods are full of Tomlinsons up there. It’s best, though, not to be too sensitive about our names.

Joe Jones was on the Pastor Search Team when I came to First Baptist Church—those of us who knew Joe, miss him--but what a great name! Of course, Joe had a good name for lots of reasons—but it was hard to get *his* name confused. But Joe did tell me about a man who forgot his name. When he needed to write it down, he tried the old trick: “Now, how do you spell your name?”

Some of you know Neal Glenn. People find it confusing when a person has two first names OR two last names OR in his case, two names that can go either way. When I did his daughter’s wedding, I first called her Sherry Neal instead of Sherry Glenn--confusing!

Paul Dickinson wrote a book called Names. His hobby is collecting unusual names. Names sometimes seem to be prophetic. In 1941, two men were executed in the electric chair in Florida. Their names were Will Burn... and Will... Frizzle. True story!

He found a man named Dan Druff—after his parents saddled him with that name, he grew up to be... a barber. And Jeff Treadwell became a Podiatrist.

He discovered two police officers who were partners, and their last names were Goforth and... Ketchum. He found a gynecologist named Dr. Ovary; and a urologist named Dr. P. P. Peters. He declares he doesn't make this stuff up.

What's in a name? God says there's a whole lot in a name when it's HIS name we're using. This is what the third Commandment is all about—God's Name should be respected and honored; and it should never be abused or misused.

But all names are important, aren't they? Our names represent our reputations. We say, "He's making quite a name for himself," or "She comes from a good family—they have a good name."

When we speak a person's name, we automatically think of his or her reputation or character. Our minds don't just go blank when we hear names like Osama bin Laden or Adolf Hitler. We have very different thoughts when we hear Mother Theresa or Billy Graham.

Biblical names often communicated something of a person's character. Jacob's name meant supplanter or deceiver--someone who couldn't be trusted. He lived up to that name until God got hold of Jacob and changed his character. When He did, God also changed Jacob's name to Israel, meaning "God rules."

When we think of misusing God's name or using His name in vain, we often think first of swearing. Swearing is indeed a disrespectful use of God's name, but it's not the only bad use of God's name.

**2. Let's pose a second question now: HOW DO WE MISUSE GOD'S NAME?** (or "take the Lord's Name in vain?")

**A.** Let's go ahead and deal with this first: we can **Use God's Name PROFANELY**—i.e., we employ God's name to curse or swear. We may do this when we're irritated about something, and we want to make sure the whole world knows how we feel.

We need to vent, right? It's not healthy to keep all that bottled up inside. And, frankly, there's some truth to that; but there are ways to express our anger without doing violence to God's name.

Have you noticed how foul-mouthed we've become in our culture--it seems to be getting worse. Will movies not sell if they're not loaded with profanity? Do candidates think they won't be heard unless they curse? Bad language has made its way into the conversations we hear almost daily. The lyrics of many popular songs are embarrassing, at least, and often destructive.

This is offensive to God, friends. Whether it's His name we're abusing or the names of any of His children, or any ethnic or gender group—or the disabled--all are created in God's image, so I'm assuming God takes all this kind of talk personally. Most of us would likely defend our children's names before we would our own!

Maybe it's naïve to think that we can avoid such language--for ourselves or our children, seeing how pervasive it is in our culture—but, listen--we can try. We can certainly pay attention to what our children are hearing on a regular basis. We can do more than just ignore the problem--I know we can do better than that!

I used to go into a little diner that had a sign on the wall that said, "If you wouldn't say it in church, don't say it here." Not a bad rule.

I heard about a farmer who was late coming home for dinner. His wife said, "Did the wagon break down?" "No," said the farmer, obviously frustrated. Then he explained: "On the way home, I picked up the preacher and gave him a ride. From that point on, that blankety-blank mule didn't understand a thing I said."

Why do people take God's name in vain—and I mean in the sense of swearing or cursing? Some do it in absolute defiance of God and everything holy, I suppose; but many others probably just think they are being macho, or this is what it takes to fit in, or maybe they just lack mental or emotional control.

It takes a little discipline for some people not to swear, but being a person who consistently honors God with his life and words does require some discipline, which includes the language we use. It shouldn't be too much to ask to not use the Lord's name profanely.

**B.** But there are other ways that we wrongly use God's name, and

some of these could be bigger challenges for us, frankly. For example, we can **Use God's Name LIGHTLY**.

The literal meaning of taking God's name in "vain" is "to empty it of content, or to make it irrelevant." To put this another way, it's to use God's name without seeing the significance of what we're doing—again, to take God's name lightly.

Did you see the movie called *Oh, God?* That's the one where George Burns—yes, it's a very old movie--Burns was in the role of God while John Denver played a man who was being called by God to be a modern-day prophet.

I loved the scene early in the film where the two of them are talking... and John Denver, without thinking, says to himself, "Oh, God." (Now it's OMG—right? We hear this all the time: "Omagod"—is it harmless, or disrespectful, or demeaning? When speaking God's name, maybe we should exercise a bit of caution.

Anyway, Denver says, "Oh God." So, God--George Burns--turns to him and says, "Yes, what is it?" "Oh, it's nothing," says Denver. "It's just an expression, a manner of speaking. Nothing more."

To which God replies, "That's why I'm here. I want people to know that I'm more than... 'just an expression.'"

Now, that's not a bad commentary on the meaning of the third commandment. Some of us have read the writings of the late Quaker scholar Elton Trueblood. In one of his books, Trueblood suggested that profane language (cursing) may not sound as bad in God's ears as mere "lip service."

He believed the third commandment should be rendered, "You shall not take God lightly, or treat Him as secondary." He explained that many want all the benefits of Christianity without any of the responsibilities that go along with being a follower of Jesus Christ.

The worst form of breaking the third commandment, according to Trueblood, is hypocrisy—claiming to have a relationship with God, but not living it. That's taking God too lightly.

What are some other ways we're guilty of taking God's name in vain—taking it too lightly? If we sing hymns or praise choruses which speak of God, or the Lord or Jesus Christ, or our Savior, but our hearts and voices never approach anything that could be called

adoration or praise or wonder, then we've taken God's name in vain—through the emptiness of our worship.

Some people try to impress others with "Jesus talk"—always saying "Praise God," "Hallelujah," and "Thank you, Jesus." They may be sincere; but to the extent they're trying to impress the rest of us with their spirituality, that's just "vain repetitions." Their speaking is empty, and it dishonors God.

People say they're going to do something or not do something because God told them so. But sometimes what they're saying doesn't ring true; and they actually may be putting words into God's mouth. I don't think God likes that. We don't like it when people do that to us, right? Well, I don't think God likes it either.

A husband says to his wife, "I've prayed about this and I know God wants me to have a new boat—or whatever." That does happen, friends. Let's hope God has a sense of humor!

A minister friend told me about a very superficial lady who was a member of his church. She invited him over to see how she was remodeling the living room in her very extravagant home. She told him she had prayed and prayed trying to decide which sofa God wanted her to have, then showed him the upholstery samples and asked him to pray with her about which one to choose.

Well, he refused, telling her that God had more important things to be concerned with. She, of course, while unable to decide about sofas, was able to decide on a new church--with a pastor who had a deeper understanding of prayer.

If we empty God's Name of meaning, if we continually use His Name *lightly*, without giving much thought or care to what we're doing or saying--our relationship with God becomes shallow and, by and large, meaningless.

Jesus told us, "**Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.**" (Matthew 7:21) He was teaching us about the dangers of misusing his Name. Don't say it unless you mean it. Don't use the Lord's Name lightly!

**3. Well, HOW DOES GOD WANT HIS NAME TO BE USED?** The Bible provides plenty of answers to this question.

**A. First, God Wants His Name To Be REVERED (Respected).** Jesus made this clear when He taught us to pray, **“Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name.”**

To hallow God’s name is to recognize its holiness. This goes beyond respect. It means having in our minds and hearts a sense or reverence, an attitude of adoration, a feeling of awe in the presence of God’s name.

**Psalm 29:2** says, **“Give to the Lord the glory due His name.”** This is the positive side of “not taking the Lord’s name in vain.” We use God’s name reverently, respectfully, and in a context where we intend to bring glory to His Name.

God doesn’t want His Name to be revered because He’s insecure or hyper-sensitive—the way we can be when it comes to our names. God simply knows that how we use His Name says so much about our relationship with Him, whether it’s sincere or not.

And it’s always in our best interest for this relationship to be solid, for us to worship God only, and love God sincerely above all the other loves in our lives. It’s because of God’s love for us and wanting the best for us that He insists that we respect His Name.

**B. God also wants His Name To Be REPRESENTED**—as in well represented!

**II Timothy 2:19** says, **“Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”** (NKJV) Another, simpler translation says, **“A person who calls himself a Christian should not be doing things that are wrong.”** We are to be good ambassadors for Christ, but how often do we misrepresent who He is and what He stands for?

From time to time, the issue is raised about whether the phrase “under God” should be in our Pledge of Allegiance. Dr. Ronald Cook of Truett Seminary made an interesting observation about this debate. He says we should only keep the phrase if we’re willing to think more deeply about what it means.

Listen to what he says: “If ‘under God’ is kept in the Pledge of Allegiance, then persons of faith are obligated to hold the nation accountable to the One whose Name has been invoked, and to divine character and nature and will.”

I read that and thought, "But isn't this just about choosing up sides—either we're FOR God or AGAINST Him--so we can all cheer and shout and yell depending on whose team we're on—just so everybody will know!

I mean, pledging that we're "one nation under God" surely doesn't mean we have to work on issues like justice and righteousness, mercy and peace—you know, the things God tells us He's in to. Saying "under God" doesn't imply that we have to represent Him well... or do deeds that truly bring honor to His name! Does it?

Think of the implications. The next time we're with a throng of people saying the pledge of allegiance together, there just might be a few folks in the crowd—maybe, perhaps--who are using God's name... in vain! But surely that has nothing to do with the third commandment!

**C. Finally, God Wants His Name To Be Relied Upon.** The Biblical evidence for this is overwhelming. **Psalms 33:21** says, "**For our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name.**" Listen to these well-known verses:

**"Whatever you do, do it in the name of the Lord."** And, **"If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."** This is not about doing or asking for absolutely anything, but doing and asking for that which is in keeping with God's character, His will, His name.

**Acts 4:12** says, **"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."**

**John 20:31** says, **"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."**

A young soldier who was causing problems among the other soldiers was brought before Alexander the Great. Alexander asked the soldier: "What's your name?" The young soldier replied: "Sir, it's Alexander." Alexander the Great bristled at that, and then told him this: "Either change your name... or change your conduct."

Maybe we need to apologize to God for misusing His name. Let's ask Him to forgive us—for we've all been guilty of using His Name in vain. Then let's give to God our hearts, our actions, and our words—that all of these will lift up and bring honor to God's Name.