

Exodus 20:7 Watch what you say!

Introduction

You are sitting down with your spouse and the newborn baby boy, what shall we call him—what about Adolf? I could probably wager my mortgage securely in the fact that no couple associated with this church ever had that conversation. A name once unremarkable in Germany prior to the Nazi era, now conjures up images of the evil Fuhrer whose actions were infamous and unforgettable. Names matter words are significant. On 15 October 2011 in a game of football at Anfield between Liverpool and Manchester United, Luis Suarez the centre forward for Liverpool FC, called the Manchester United full-back Patrice Evra a ‘negro’. Suarez apparently claimed that in his home country of Uruguay this was an acceptable name to use to a person with darker than average skin colour. The fact that the two footballers had struggled to get on during the match ensured that outside observers appeared less than convinced by this explanation. He was subsequently banned for eight games. Names matter; the significance of words associated with names matters. The old saying: ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never harm me’ is total nonsense. If this is true concerning fellow humans—how do we approach this subject with respect to God? In current British society an alarmingly high number of people routinely take God’s name in vain as a mere figure of speech. An interesting example occurred on Monday 13 February on the Today programme on Radio 4. The context was a debate between Revd Giles Fraser, former Canon of St Paul’s Cathedral, and Richard Dawkins, representing his new organisation: ‘The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science’. Dawkins was waxing eloquent regarding his claim that ‘the majority of professing Christians were not real Christians’ because when stopped in the street and quizzed on their beliefs they could not identify the title of the first book of the New Testament. Revd Fraser then turned the tables by asking a simple question: Richard, if I said to you what is the full title of *The Origin Of Species*, I’m sure you could tell me that. Dawkins: Yes I could. Fraser: Go on then.

Dawkins: On the Origin of Species...Uh...With, oh, God, On the Origin of Species. There is a sub-title with respect to the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life. [*Daily Telegraph*, 14 February 2012]

In this context I’m not interested in Dawkins’ inability to pass a test of his own making, rather in his moment of panic the fact that he took God’s name in vain so naturally and easily without any awareness of what he had just done. The fact that some of the columnists who wrote about the exchange didn’t mention it either also speaks volumes about how pervasive this problem is in our society. Exodus 20:7 tells us: *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.* It is important to be aware that this commandment covers more than simply the use or non-use of particular words. *The name of the Lord* is a representation of all that God stands for with respect to His laws, His standards as well as the honour due to His being. It can by extension on occasions include the treatment of those who speak or witness for Him when they are verbally or physically attacked because they are representing God. Saul of Tarsus was profoundly shocked to hear what Jesus had to say in their encounter on the Damascus Road, recorded in Acts 9:4b-5: *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?* ⁵ *Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, He replied.* This fanatical young Jew thought he was merely attacking followers of a heretical Jewish sect. It never occurred to him that his wrongful acts were by extension seen as attacks upon the One they were representing. However, our focus in this message is the teaching of this Third Commandment with reference directly to God. The breach of this statute is normally through speech. Banning inappropriate speech is something human nature struggles with. James reminds us that: *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.* ⁷ *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the*

sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸ but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison (James 3:6-8). His key point is that words we utter can be capable of the greatest good or irreparable harm to other people; therefore, we must be careful in the choice of words we speak.

1. Reverence for God's Name

(a) **The Importance of honouring His Name** At the start of Exodus 20 prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments there is the revelation of the name of the One who is giving this sacred Law to the Jewish people. *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt...* (Exodus 20:2). God's name stands for all that He is, for the glory of His majestic person, the living, the Almighty, the all-holy God, and for the glories of His character as One who is all-knowing, all-good, ever-loving and merciful Father. It is important to note that the strongest warnings against breaking any commandments concern the second commandment against idolatry and the third here against the misuse of His name *for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name*. Why is this the case? It is possible that breaches of the next seven commandments could be addressed under the judicial system of Israelite society, but the earlier three commandments are between the individual and God. However, this is simply speculation as only God knows why there is such an emphasis here. It is possible that God gives these safeguards because human beings would regard their breach as a trivial or minor thing rather than the serious offence against the honour due to His holy name. This being so, it is a serious challenging of attitudes within our culture today. (b) **The Significance of Names** (i) **Authority** when we see a police officer or member of the Armed Forces in uniform we see far more than an individual man or woman. It is what they are representing on duty by the uniform in the name of our country. To a lesser degree the same principle applies with other forms of work dress, but the degree of authority is less. (ii) **Power** Someone's 'name' in our culture covers their reputation and when that is wrongly called into question then there is the potential for slander or libel proceedings –for those who have the wealth to afford the risk of taking such a matter to court. Think for a moment of the most famous names in business of the current era. What image of a car do you have when you think of a Rolls Royce or Mercedes Benz, is it not very different to that of a Trabant or the Yugo? How would you view the mention of a Rolex or an Apple Product? (iii) **Character** Names mean so much more than mere labels they stand for an identity and offer a clear message to those who heed what they are communicating. This is why the advertising budgets of major corporations is so large. They are determined that the way their products are viewed will be shaped by their own presentation and message, even when the general public has a good idea already. The intention is to reinforce the character they wish to portray of themselves. (c) **God's view of His Name** God was concerned that the people of Israel represented Him accurately before the nations and urged them to do so in a right and holy manner. Deuteronomy 28:9-10 states: *The Lord will establish you as His holy people, as He promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in His ways.* ¹⁰ *Then all the peoples on earth will see that you **are called by the name of the Lord**, and they will fear you.* This consciousness of their responsibility to honour the reputation of God is seen in these two quotations from Isaiah. Firstly with primary reference to His covenant people in Isaiah 43:7: *everyone **who is called by My name**, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made* and then note the contrast with Gentile nations explained in Isaiah 63:19: *We are yours from of old; but you have not ruled over them, **they have not been called by Your name**.* When Amos uttered his famous critique of social injustice in Israel notice the culmination of his argument in Amos 2:6-7: *This is what the Lord says: For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.* ⁷ *They trample on the heads of the poor as*

upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl **and so profane My holy name**. Jesus, in the pattern for prayer taught to His disciples, urged us to say: *hallowed be Your name* (Matthew 6:9b), that is treat it with the utmost respect and reverence, never lightly or disrespectfully. When Channel 4's *The New Ten Commandments* programme put the choices to popular vote, this one was the third to be rejected. Comments ranged from 'No Point' to 'How could we play football?!' Jonathan Sachs, the Chief Rabbi of the UK in response simply said: 'Language matters... it can kill' [J. Parmiter, *Ten at Work*, p. 148]. At the human level if someone in our hearing is unfairly trashing the name /reputation of a family member or close friend it is unlikely that you would be well disposed towards that person. They have made no reference to you, and may not know of your relationship with the person they are describing, but it makes no difference because they have misused the name of someone special to us and our sense of outrage at this misconduct is an inevitable consequence. (d) **Misuse of His name** (i) deliberate insults At the current time in text messaging, amongst other forms of communication, 'OMG' is a common expletive of surprise or shock- actually it is blasphemy and deeply offensive to the One whose name is taken in vain. How much greater is the offence when someone, a mere creature, misuses the name of Almighty God! In Leviticus 24:10-16 there is the account of an unconverted man who takes God's name in vain during a fight with an Israelite. The judgement upon him for that offence was the death penalty. In the era of the Christian Church, post Pentecost, taking God's name in vain has never been a capital offence, but God views this sin no less seriously than in the Old Testament era. Our culture is politically correct and abusive language meant to be outlawed, but have you ever heard someone take the name of Allah in vain or Mohammed or Krishna or Buddha? Why is it the God of the Bible whose name is blasphemed time and again? It is a calculated insult knowing that Christians will not respond with violence. By contrast, when Salman Rushdie wrote his book, *Satanic Verses*, an irreverent critique of the Islamic faith, many Muslims were outraged calling it blasphemous. As a result a fatwa calling for Rushdie's death was issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran on 14 February 1989. In Pakistan a small but increasing number of Christians and representatives of other minorities have been imprisoned or killed as a result of dubious charges of blasphemy. (ii) Improper usage In courts up and down the land witness are required to swear an oath, usually but not exclusively on the Bible to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. To lie under oath is not only to commit perjury, but also to dishonour the God under whose auspices the oath was taken. God's name can also be taken in vain by Christians who casually inform others that the Lord told them to pass on a word or message that almost certainly was a figment of their own imagination. This may not be a significant issue in Baptist Churches but in some charismatic circles the regular casual claim of divine sanction for words and actions comes dangerously close to, if not actually violating this commandment. A right attitude of reverence for God will help us honour Him in our speech

2. Right use of God's Name

(a) God's People can use His name The only people entitled to use God's name in their regular conversation are those in covenant relationship with Him. This is the context of Israel's relationship with Yahweh in the Old Testament, a community which also included a minority of Gentiles who placed their faith in the God of Israel. Isaiah 43:7 reminds us of our calling: *everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made...* Many of the Israelites incorporated some form of the divine name in their children's names, for example, **Elijah** (meaning My God is Yah(weh)) or **Isaiah** (Yah is my helper).

This was permitted as long as the families in question were living God-honouring lives in faithfulness to the covenant. However, to live life without reference to God and carry His name as part of your own was an act of mockery of Yahweh. God's Old Testament people were to worship Him in the correct geographical place –Jerusalem. Deuteronomy 12:5 states: *But you are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes **to put His Name there** for his dwelling. To that place you must go;* Joel's prophecy concerning the end times and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon Gentiles as well as Jews, stated that: *And **everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved**; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls* (Joel 2:32). There is power in this name to grant the gift of salvation. Therefore it is natural to praise God in this way as Psalm 29:1-2 does: *Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.* ² *Ascribe to the Lord **the glory due to His name**; worship the Lord in the splendour of His holiness. And Let them praise **the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted**; His splendour is above the earth and the heavens* (Psalm 148:13). When Israelites were speaking the truth they were allowed to make formal oaths in His name to support the claims they were making. Deuteronomy 6:13 states: *Fear the Lord your God, serve Him only and **take your oaths in His name**.* David and Jonathan did that in I Samuel 20:12-17 to stress their loyalty both to God and each other though they would not meet again for the foreseeable future face to face, yet each knew the other would keep his oath –that is true friendship. (b) **Don't misrepresent God** In the secular world name-dropping is a growing issue in certain circles; individuals letting it be known that film stars, sports people, politicians or.... are friends, acquaintances or in some way part of their circle of influence- whether true or not. Over the centuries God's name has been invoked not just for the Crusades to the Holy Land by Roman Catholic Popes, but by Muslim clerics for numerous jihads and lets be fair by some Protestant Church leaders as well. Oral Roberts, American Pentecostal TV preacher who in January 1987 claimed that God was going to 'call him home' unless he received donations of around £8 million dollars towards the City of Faith Medical Centre at the Oral Roberts Hospital. 39.1 million dollars came in by April 1987, though by March 1988 the medical facility was closed due to lack of funding [www.ondctrine.com accessed 17.2.12]. It may have been a great fund-raising technique at the time, but it had nothing to do with God and was a misuse of His name. From the promoters of apartheid in South Africa to some of the Nazi leaders in Germany and to both sides in each of the Two World Wars God's name has been invoked as being on that particular side in the conflict. A more balanced perspective was given by President Abraham Lincoln in a conversation with a supporter during the American Civil War. After the fall of Atlanta, a woman remarked to him at a white House function: 'Oh, Mr president, I feel sure that God is on our side...don't you?' 'Ma'am', replied Lincoln solemnly, ' I am more concerned that we should be on God's side [J. Jon, Ten, p.232]. This surely must be our concern as well.

3. **Revelation of God's Name**

Jesus had a clear reverence for His Father's name; that is His reputation. He declared in John 5:43: *I have come **in My Father's name**, and you do not accept Me; but if someone else comes in his*

own name, you will accept him. He made it plain to a sceptical Jewish congregation, that even when He performed amazing miracles the credit ought to go to His Father: *Jesus answered, I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for Me,*²⁶ *but you do not believe because you are not My sheep.* How did he understand His life's work? It is revealed in His high priestly prayer in John 17:26: *And I have declared to them **Your name, and will declare it**, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them* (NKJV –NIV paraphrases this verse). His earnest desire throughout His ministry was encapsulated in John 12: 23-28: ²³ *Jesus replied, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* ²⁴ *I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.*²⁵ *The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* ²⁶ *Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.*²⁷ *Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'?* **No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.**²⁸ **Father, glorify your name! Then a voice came from heaven, I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.** The Early Church followed Jesus' example in offering reverence to God's name. James, after listing some disreputable conduct by professing Christians in James 2:5-6, declares: *Are they not the ones **who are slandering the noble name of Him** to whom you belong?* The New Testament revelation of God is clearly Trinitarian, which means that this respect or reverence for God's name is not only to the Father, but also to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The disciples of Jesus made this discovery on an early mission trip. They reported back to Jesus with this joyful exclamation in Luke 10:17: *The seventy-two returned with joy and said, Lord, even the demons submit to us **in Your name**.* And we are very familiar with Paul's words in Philippians 2:9-11: *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave **Him the name that is above every name,***¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*¹¹ *and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* This is based on a quotation from Isaiah 45:23 that refers to God the Father but now explicitly identifies Jesus as being worthy of the same reverence and praise. Yet Jesus declares that the most serious sin that will never be forgiven is that against the Holy Spirit. Matthew 12:31-32 states: *And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.*³² *Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.* All three are united in the baptismal command in Matthew 28:19...*baptising them **in the name** [singular] **of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.***

4. Restrictions on the use of God's Name

(a)In Swearing Oaths Jesus did not prohibit all oath-taking in Matthew 5:33-37 where He was cautioning His followers about careful use of language, especially in relation to promises made where God's name was invoked. After all He spoke under oath in Matthew 26:63-64 in court in response to questioning from the High priest. What He was deeply concerned about was the accuracy and integrity of the words we utter. (b) In Promise-making A promise made has to be a promise kept. Our word should be our bond. Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933) was one of America's most respected Presidents. His personal integrity was of the highest order. It was said of him: 'If Calvin says he'll do a thing, the thing will be done no need to check on him.' In the words of Ecclesiastes 5:5: *It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it* (NLV). This has obvious implications for business dealings and relationships

with colleagues in the workplace, just as much as in our families and in church. We cannot operate differently from Monday to Saturday compared with our conduct on God's Day, Sunday. In a culture where promise keeping is so lightly valued, not just among politicians but across all strata's of society this is an opportunity for modelling personal integrity. (c) **In normal speech and thought** Job, the patriarch had a real concern for his children, continually representing them before the Lord with sacrifices –his equivalent to our praying for our children - in case *my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts* (Job 1:5). This will affect our language in conversation and our degree of comfort in watching TV and other forms of entertainment media. If we take this commandment seriously it will affect our pleasure when in otherwise acceptable forms of entertainment actors or comedians blaspheme God's name and it becomes necessary to change channels or use the 'off' button. (d) **In acts of Worship** In Judges 17:2-3, an extraordinary account of a Jewish mother invoking God's name to make something prohibited to use in the worship of God. *The Lord bless you, my son!... his mother... said, I solemnly consecrate my silver to the Lord for my son to make a carved image and a cast idol. I will give it back to you.* We are unlikely to do that, but participation in multi-faith worship services would be out of order for people who claim to believe in the One true and living God. Jesus taught us to pray *hallowed be Your name* (Matthew 6:9b), this means 'set-apart' or distinct from the 'names' of other claimed deities. Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron were struck down by the Lord for unauthorised worship (Leviticus 10), that is they performed a ceremony God had not sanctioned as an act of worship in the tabernacle. It is a warning that irreverence and frivolity have no place in acts of Worship as we serve a Holy God. In proclamation of God's Word the preacher has a duty to speak only that which he genuinely believes is in line with Holy Scripture. Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23 remind 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.*²² *Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'*²³ *Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'* Tampering with the text of Scripture to promote sexual immoral behaviour (in violation of Leviticus 18 and I Corinthians 6:9, for example) or seeking to claim passages of Scripture are not original –such as I Corinthians 14:34 by feminist Bible commentators –purely for ideological reasons is dishonouring His name. (e) **In honouring God** A comment overheard after a church service 'I didn't get anything out of the worship today'. The wise response given: 'I'm sorry, I didn't realise it was for you' [J. Jon, *Ten*, p.235]. 'It's all about You Jesus' – We sing the words but do we grasp their significance for church and for life –Its for His glory and honour not ours! When we grasp that truth it may help us reorientate our thinking sometimes and our words. It may provide an opportunity for witness. 'I don't know how you did...', someone may say in commending us at a tough time in our lives. If we sincerely believe the Lord enabled us then be willing to say so. (f) **In Challenging Blasphemy** graciously asking colleagues /friends not to misuse God's name; actually if we have a reasonable relationship with them already they ought to appreciate our point, because they in turn would want you to respect them. May God help us honour Him in our thoughts, words and actions, Amen.