

VOTC – March 2016

2. The Proper Use of God's Name

Hello dear listeners,

Last time we considered together the depth of meaning in the Name of God. We saw that his Name reveals his very character, his reputation, his glory!

Well, once you see the glory of the Name of the Lord, you start to understand why the Lord guards his wonderful name in the third commandment. His name speaks so vividly of his love for his people; it heralds his salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ. How terrible, then, is *sin* against his Name. That sin becomes quite possible, since the Name of the Lord has come so close to us.

I quote the third commandment as the King James Version translates it, "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain." An even more literal translation is, "You shall not lift up the name of the LORD your God for nothingness." What does this mean? We can take God's glorious name, and we can lift it up like a tool. The name of God was used in legal situations, when witnesses needed to confirm their testimony. Instead of swearing on a Bible, they lifted a hand and swore by God's name.¹ God's people were not forbidden to use God's name. But they were forbidden from *misusing* it. From lifting it up as a tool in order to use it in an empty way, for their own purposes—to speak about God carelessly, even flippantly, as if he did not matter. As if his name were something worthless, a bag of trash you take to the road. That is profanity in the purest sense of the word. It is treating something holy as common. It is a way of saying God himself is worthless. It is *blasphemy*, Scripture says.

There are a number of specific ways God's name is treated as worthless, and I would like to share them with you. The first is cursing, using God's name almost like a swear word. It is something that is entrenched in society's vocabulary. Even Christians sometimes curse, though they may not realize that what they are saying constitutes as cursing. And it shows up in conversation, in emails and text messages, on social media, on the television, and so on. To be as helpful as possible, permit me some examples. "Oh my God" or "OMG" or "O God!" or "Good Lord!" or "I swear to God" or "Jesus Christ!" Sometimes God's name itself may not even be used, but replaced with a word that sounds very similar, "Oh my..." God's Name, or a replacement for God's Name is used as though it were an exclamation point! The Lord's name is abused *all the time*. People can't seem to curse *without* using God's name.

There is another way in which God's Name is used in vain. Here I think of perjury, something that happens so often in the court system. If someone has sworn an oath in court, has called upon God to bear witness, and they proceed to lie, they are guilty of perjury. They have taken God's name and treated it like nothing.

Perhaps you are not one to swear the way the world does, use God's name in vain the way society does. But it turns out that God is angry also with those who do not *prevent* and *forbid* such swearing and cursing as much as they can. We might be very inclined to defend the name of our earthly father when someone drags his name through the mud. But we sometimes excuse such cursing and swearing from those who pierce the Name of our heavenly Father, whether it's at the office, on the jobsite, or at school. As the Scriptures say, "Whoever *disowns* me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:33).

It becomes clear from this, dear listeners, that both non-Christians and Christians struggle at best and fail at worst to honour the Name of the Lord. We know well from our experiences that it is quite

¹ Lev. 19:12; Deut. 6:13; 10:20; 1 Sam. 20:42

easy to say things, or do things that take away from the honour and glory of God's name, God's reputation. We do it often, or we are silent bystanders to those who do it, and we feel guilty about that. It bothers us. We fall short in *upholding* God's reputation. Is there any hope? If God in the third commandment has said that misusing his name will result in punishment, how can anyone possibly escape that punishment?

Well, we need to speak about the proper use of God's Name. And the only satisfying, comforting, and reassuring way of doing that is by considering Jesus Christ. He experienced what it meant that God punished blasphemy of his name with death. During his trial, the high priest Caiaphas put him under oath, and said, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus answered him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then what did Caiaphas do? He tore his clothes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." (Matt. 26:63-66). And that's what the Lord Jesus suffered.

And that was in spite of the honour *he* always accorded the Name of God. He himself was completely obedient to the third commandment. He knew that Name so well. And he proclaimed it as well. Throughout his whole ministry, even at the moment when his heavenly Father had forsaken him, he revered the Name of God. He was no longer able to call him Father, but he did not blaspheme; he still feared the Name. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" No swearing or cursing, but a heartfelt prayer.

And, dear listeners, it is a prayer we may cherish. For those words were cried out so that we would hear them also today. That we would know why Jesus Christ died on the cross. *Not* for committing blasphemy. He died to spare believers from dying for blasphemy. He shouldered the curse that we deserve for all the times we have pierced the Name of God. He died to redeem sinners. This Word goes out to you today, so that you might find refuge in Christ. He is the only one who can save you from paying eternally for sins against the third commandment. He is the only one who can give you new life, renovate you, make you his very own, by the working of his Holy Spirit. For it is by his Spirit that you and I can learn how to use God's holy name in fear and reverence.

Yes, in the power of Christ, dear listeners, we can make a beginning already in this life to *rightly* confess God's name. To speak of his identity. To testify that redemption alone is what life is all about—redemption, freedom in Jesus Christ. To the honour of His Name.

We also need to rightly worship God's Name. We need to *call* upon his Name in prayer. We have to call upon him *as* the Lord Jesus has taught us to do. We can call upon him, we can *plead* upon his Name, and he will hear us. For there is nothing that God loves more than his Name. Nothing surpasses that, because in that Name lies his being.

Finally, we need to praise him in all our words and works. Our whole life must give full expression to the shine of God's Name, the gleam of his love, and the radiance of his holiness. In how we use His name, confess His name, call upon his Name, and praise his Name. Let us not blaspheme, but bless the Lord always. Let us take his name upon our lips only with fear and reverence. And let us cherish that Name that is above every name. He is the heavenly God, full of glory and love. "Blessed be his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen" (Ps. 72:19). Till next time, listeners!