

Just Keep God Holy

Exodus 20:7

Cradock Presbyterian Church

September 30, 2012

Just one line, that's all. One verse. Pretty easy, right? Just don't use that one seven-letter, compound word, and you've got it, right? Or maybe only say "God" when you're praying. Yeah, that's it. See, it's all about *words*, isn't it, words we shouldn't say, which means things we can control easily.

Guess again! This might be the hardest commandment for modern Christians to understand. But if they do, it will shine a light, a guiding light, on everything they do. Excuse me – on everything WE do.

Now, how do you get all that out of just talk? It's because of the power of God's words, and what that one word, especially, is about. Yeah, because it goes beyond just talk.

Let me remind you, *again*, what God did at the very beginning of these commandments. He reminded the people of who he was by reminding them of his holy name. "I am Yahweh - you know, the One Who Will Be Who I Will Be. The One who brought you out of Egypt and proved that I am the God of *everything*." God's name is that powerful; that's what he was saying. We're now returning to the power of that name!

Let me go a little deeper here. In their somewhat superstitious, magical culture, to know a name was to have a connection on a spiritual level with that person. If it was another human being, the implication was power over that person, even if only in some small measure; if it was a god, then the *reverse* might have been true, power could

have been over *you*, as well as to your benefit. If you knew the name of a god you could call on it for help, and maybe you'd get it; but to curse that name or defame it could bring that power down on your head.

Now we come to this third commandment itself, and we run into lots of trouble. There are a whole bunch of different translations of this commandment. You're used to the traditional "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." There are translations that say "misuse," "use irreverently," "use for evil purposes," "use in curses" or "silly banter." I suppose if you went through all of the hundreds of English-language translations of this passage, you'd come up with some other ones; but these seem to be the major ones.

And these are all correct, actually. The word that's causing the problem is the Hebrew word *lassaw*. It's meaning is emptiness, worthlessness, in a particularly negative way; it implies futility or waste. It means vanity, like when you're doing something worthless only for you; that's why the King James Version came up with "in vain." Since it's like going ahead and doing something you know is a waste, you can even talk about "frivolous" as a possible meaning, and you're still firmly in the ballpark.

In other words, when we go and do something in God's name, we'd better not do it frivolously, or futilely, worthlessly, or just for ourselves, or in any way that is less than serious, and holy. To do so is, well, EVIL. You heard what God said: he will not "acquit" anyone who misuses his name. That's legal language! It means you're *found guilty*. No penalty is mentioned here; but think about it: if God was willing to visit punishment of

some kind to the third and fourth generation on people who made *idols*, I don't want to think about what he'll do to anyone who messes with his divine name!

There is, though a more positive way to look at this commandment. There's always a positive way to look at all the "thou shall not" commandments. This commandment is saying to us, "Just keep my name holy." That's exactly what it means; something is holy when it has been set apart, elevated, made worthy and special, and not allowed to be ordinary or empty or vain. When things done in God's name have that special care given to them, when they are indeed full, and not empty, when they don't point to the world or to the one doing them but to the Creator – then they do the holy name justice.

Even more, they do the one *behind the name* justice. They keep *God* holy. See, if there really is a connection between how we regard someone's name and our relationship to them, then that applies infinitely to our relationship to God's name and our relationship to God. If God's name isn't important; if doing things in God's name doesn't mean much, then does God mean much in our lives? If God doesn't mean much, then is God even *holy* anymore?

Now think about that a minute! Something is holy when it is set apart, elevated, considered worthy and special, not considered to be ordinary or empty or vain; when it's the most important thing in life and all of life is organized around it. THAT'S what God should be in a believer's life! That's what God should be in OUR lives! That's what God needs to be in EVERYBODY'S life!

And yet we know that in our culture, God isn't even running a close second, or third; or maybe even fourth, not in this world. Not in these days. Nobody has any time for something sacred, something holy. There isn't any time for setting God apart. Everything is done in the name of – what? It's cliché to say we do things in our own name. I don't think we even do that! People do things namelessly. Everybody just keeps going, from thing to thing to thing. When God *is* acknowledged – and something like 95% of Americans believe in God, so they say – he's just a concept, an idea, a long-ago creator who might stick his hand in every now and then. There's no relationship there; if there was, then maybe God's name would mean something to people.

In other words, God himself has become, for most people, empty, worthless, a vanity. Maybe, even, frivolous. That means God surely isn't holy, not in the current scenario. Is it any wonder our society keeps getting sicker and sicker? There's nothing to fill the emptiness!

Well, we took on this set of Ten Commandments as “Ten Steps to the Life You Always Wanted.” This third step is all-important. We need to tell the world to *keep God holy!* Give God back his rightful place as the God of all things, the one who indeed is actively involved in the world, who cares about each and every person. He cares so much that he has sent his son to die on their behalf, and given them the keys to their place in heaven, *if they'll just take them!* He has the power to do all these things because *he is the one who can be who he chooses to be.* That's what his name means. He can be the one who fills the emptiness, worthlessness, sickness. So we need to give him back the power of his name. And recognizing at long last God's power and love, we

all can become healthy at last. We can help others by making sure we live our lives in such a way that we *honor* his name, in the same way we've always brought honor to our parents' names by what we do. Then they'll understand who he is – and give his name the holiness and power it deserves. And if we can do that, if we can live to bring God's name honor, to make God's name holy once again, you know what? We'll all be just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you and me – and for everyone.