

STUDY 8 - DON'T MISUSE GOD'S NAME

Commandment 3: '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)

If the Ten Commandments were a self-test quiz the Third Commandment is one that many of us might be inclined to tick off quickly. *We don't blaspheme* we might say, and, satisfied that this is one commandment that we do keep, we would move on.

Yet this is a commandment that, when looked at carefully, reveals vast and searching implications for the way that all of us use words.

→ 1 STARTER

Either:

Share out one of the following scenarios to each of the group members. Each person is to outline the situation and suggest what their reaction would be:

- You are the headmaster of a historic school; two of your pupils have just been caught on the school grounds with drugs.
- Your wife is a local politician and at a dinner party you overhear someone say how greedy and corrupt all politicians are.
- A Christian you know made some reckless investments and has lost everything. Now he is claiming that 'the Lord led him to do it'.
- You overhear someone claiming that he was the key person in setting up a very successful business deal. You know that, in reality, he got involved in the project only at a late stage.
- You are the church treasurer and for weeks have been trying to persuade the minister that a new building project is unrealistic. One Sunday your church minister tells the congregation confidently that he believes it is God's will that the church go ahead with the program.

- You have just been interviewed by police over a major theft apparently committed by your brother.
- You are the manager of an engineering firm and have just found out that one of your products has been made with substandard parts and will have to be the subject of a high-profile public recall.
- You are the minister of a church; the wife of a senior church figure has just made apparently genuine and very public allegations that he has physically abused her.
- You are the captain of a naval destroyer docked in a Caribbean port; two of your crew have been arrested after being involved in wrecking a local restaurant while drunk.

Or;

Discuss the following:

A) Over breakfast you read in your paper that someone is producing a blasphemous film about Jesus. Do you:

- Decide to write to your congressional representative?
- Decide to pray that it will fail at the box office?
- Decide to pray for God to judge the wicked?
- Shrug your shoulders and turn to the next page?

B) You have had an awful week and you turn up at church feeling thoroughly down. The service starts off with a loud and cheerful song about how wonderful we feel because we know that Jesus loves us. Do you:

- Mouth the words?
- Force a smile and sing?
- Refuse to sing because you think it's the only honest response?
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➔ 2 SURGERY

Discuss one of the following:

A) How have you seen or heard the name of God or Jesus Christ being treated lightly these days?

B) Why does God's name now seem to 'carry no weight'? What effects does this seem to have on society?

C) Some people may know or have known churches where there was an awed and holy reverence for God that bordered on fear. Is this a good or bad thing?

→ 3 STUDY

This is divided into an Old and a New Testament part.

The Old Testament

In the world of the Bible, your name was more than simply something that you were called; it expressed who you were and what you stood for.

A) A passage which helps us understand what the expression 'the Name of the LORD' means is to be found in Exodus chapter 3. Read Exodus 3:1-15. Here God reveals himself to Moses.

- In verse 6, who does God describe himself as? Why do you think he does this?
- In verse 14 God gives his name. I AM WHO I AM or I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS are the most probable translations.
 - *What does this name suggest about how God relates to human beings? Does he need us?
 - *What does this name suggest about how God relates to the future? Does he change?
- In verse 15 the name Yahweh (translated as the LORD in most English versions, or Jehovah in some older translations) is given. This shortened form of 'I AM WHO I AM' is the personal name of God and the one that is behind the agreement or covenant with Israel that is at the heart of the Old Testament.
 - *What is the difference between knowing someone important only by their title ('Doctor', 'General' and so on) and being allowed to call them by their personal name?
 - *How do you think Moses would feel about being given God's personal name?
 - *How would knowing this help him in the task of leading God's people out of Egypt?
- From this whole passage what impression do you think Moses was meant to have of the LORD/Yahweh?
- In an effort to ensure that they could not break this commandment Jews never pronounced the name of Yahweh and replaced it by the expression 'the LORD', a practice that has been passed into English. Do you think this is a solution to the challenge of this commandment?

The psalms are full of encouragements to praise the name of the LORD.

B) Have four people read out the following:

- 1) Psalm 8:1,9.
- 2) Psalm 22:22.
- 3) Psalm 96: 1,2.
- 4) Psalm 99:1-3.

- In what way do these psalms suggest the name of God ought to be treated?
- Do we treat God's name in this way?

C) Read 1 Samuel 17:32-47. The background is that the armies of Israel under King Saul are being challenged by Goliath, the Philistine giant.

- From the language used (vv.36,43b,45, etc.) is this a purely political battle between two armies? What is at stake?
- What do you think David meant when he said that he attacked 'in the name' of the LORD Almighty? Is this language we could ever use of our (hopefully less violent) Christian activities?

D) Read Ezekiel 36:16-24.

- What allegation concerns God in verses 20 and 21?
- In the covenant the LORD had declared himself to be Israel's king. If the Israelites had stayed in exile, what would that have said about him?
- What action does God say he will take to defend his own name?

E) Abuses of God's name occur throughout the Old Testament. Read Leviticus 24:10-16,23.

- Why was blasphemy treated so seriously?
- Why do you think the whole community was to be involved in the punishment?

F) Read Leviticus 19:12.

- What kind of thing do you think is being condemned here?
- Why is it a serious offence?
- What might a modern equivalent to this be?

G) Read Isaiah 48: 1,2.

- What is God's criticism here?
- Why is this offensive to him?
- Are similar sins possible today?

H) Read Judges 11:29-39.

- How does Jephthah misuse the name of the LORD?
- What lessons are there for us here?

The New Testament

Jesus treats this commandment about misusing God's name in his usual radical way.

A) Read Matthew 5:33-37.

- What do you think was the problem with making vows in the name of the LORD? (Remember the story of Jephthah?)
- Clearly, vows that used an alternative to the LORD'S name were felt to be easier to break. What, however, does Jesus say about making *any* vow?
- What sort of lives must we live if we can't back up our promises with a solemn oath?

Note: The general consensus here is that Jesus is not forbidding formal oaths such as those taken in a court of law but those made to boost promises or threats.

B) Read Matthew 6:9.

- What does it mean to honor or hallow God's name?
- How is this the opposite of misusing God's name?
- Why are we to pray for this?

C) Read Matthew 7:21-23.

- How do the people described here misuse God's name?
- What is the judgment that they will suffer?
- Is this a danger for us? How can we avoid it?

D) Read Philippians 2:9-11.

- What does it mean that the name of Jesus is above every other name?
- How will the value of the name of Jesus be illustrated in the future?
- Do we treat the name of Jesus as being sacred now?

E) The Bible teaches that the name of Jesus has power but that this power must not be abused. Read Acts 19:13-17.

- In what way were these exorcists misusing Jesus' name?
- How, in less obviously supernatural areas than exorcisms, might people fall into a similar trap today?
- What was the result of this incident in terms of respect for Jesus' name!

F) Paul gives another illustration of a misuse in Romans 2:21-24.

- What are these people claiming to be?
- What are they in reality? What is the result?
- Give an example of how this might happen in a church situation today.

→ 4 SUMMARY

Think about how we can *dishonor God's name*

- Do we ever use the name of God or Jesus without thinking about what we are saying?
- When we say *Amen* to a prayer, do we realize that we are effectively committing ourselves to what it says?
- Are we ever frivolous or careless about our worship?
- If we are known to be Christians it means that we publicly bear Christ's name. Are we careful how we live in case a public sin or failing drags him down with us?
- Does the way that our church handles itself bring honor or shame to the name of Jesus?

Think about how we can *honor God's name*

- Do we ever give something or someone else the credit when it really belongs to God?
- Do our churches (doubtless inadvertently) ever promote themselves more than Jesus?
- Do we encourage people to engage in acts of worship (prayer, praise, taking communion) without them thinking about what they are saying, singing or doing?

Discussion

- There are one or two examples in the Bible of curses (e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:22). Would it ever be right to curse someone?
- If we are in a difficult situation (perhaps say, asked to contribute in a complex debate) is it best to stay silent rather than run the risk of dishonoring God by saying something stupid?
- How do we balance a 'fear of the Lord' with an awareness of God's love towards us?

So what?

At the end of this study:

- What has challenged you most?
- In what areas are you most vulnerable?
- What attitude or action do you need to change?

→ 5 STEPPING OUT

Practical suggestions

- Is your life consistent with your label? Is there a gap between your beliefs and your behavior? Seek to bridge that gap.
- Watch your language! Are the words that you use acceptable to God? In the way that you say things acceptable to God?
- Are you known as a person of your word?
- Pay attention to how you sing or pray. We all have slips of concentration but do our hearts really mean what our lips say?
- Do you give God all the glory when good things happen or do we try and grab a bit of it for ourselves?
- Are you giving God adequate credit for all he has done and is doing for us?
- Are you blaming God for something that is not his fault?

Further study

A) Read Exodus 34:5-7. In this passage the LORD defines who he is and what his name means.

- What is there here to encourage us to approach God?
- What is there here to challenge us to respect God?

Note: verse 7b reflects the (act that, unless we let God deal with it, sin has repercussions that goes beyond our own generation. This comes up in the next study.

B) Read Isaiah 9:6. The prophet Isaiah here looks forward to the coming Messiah and predicts what he will be called.

- What is the difference between a name and a title?
- How does Jesus live up to these titles?

C) Read Matthew 1:20-23.

- What two names are given to the child here?
- How are they prophetic of Jesus' coming ministry?

Note: 'Jesus' is the Greek form of 'Joshua' or 'Yeshua' which means 'Yahweh saves'.

D) Read Acts 4:11-12. What does this tell us about the proper use of the name of Jesus?

Questions to think about

- When we pray for something in Jesus' name, but don't really believe that God will answer our prayers, aren't we misusing the name of Jesus?
- Someone who is not a Christian tells you that they intend getting married in a Christian ceremony even though they do not believe in God. Is this an innocent mistake or a dangerous misuse of God's name?
- Do we dishonor God when we take communion without thinking (see I Corinthians 11:29)?

For prayer

- Pray that we honor God and all that he stands for.
- Pray that our lives would bring God honor and not shame.
- Pray that there would be a respect and reverence for God's name and God's word in our land.