

Call Upon Me in the Day of Trouble

In the name of our great high priest who intercedes for us before the throne of his Father in heaven, dear friends in Christ: Our Lenten meditations this year have been on the Ten Commandments. This is an appropriate theme for Lent as the Commands of God are meant primarily to show us our sin and our need for a Savior as great as the one God sent us in his Son. On this solemn evening that we commemorate the passion and death of our Lord Jesus, we come to the Second Commandment – the one that forbids the misuse of God's most holy name. And this too is especially fitting because the charge for which Jesus was ultimately condemned to death – falsely – by the high council of the Jews was blasphemy, declaring himself to be God, which indeed would have a violation of the Second Commandment if it had been claimed by any other man. For Jesus it happened to be true. In addition to this, throughout the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion we find no shortage of other examples of both the proper and the improper use of the Lord's name.

So let's begin. How do we misuse God's name? Perhaps most commonly we do it with all those frivolous and meaningless exclamations like, "Oh God", "O my God" (sometimes shortened to OMG), Jesus, Jesus Christ, Christ Almighty, et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseum. Such expressions are purely obnoxious. They serve no other purpose than to show contempt for God's holy name. To be sure, they make God's name unholy. Holy means set apart, separate, only to be used for certain things. When we use expressions like these we cheapen and desecrate God's name. And how would you like it if every time someone was surprised or upset or angry they shouted out your name? You'd find it pretty irritating, wouldn't you? Then why do you want to irritate the Lord? That's never a wise thing to do. And the Scriptures inform us that we will be judged for every idle word. How much more will we be condemned when we abuse God's name?

We misuse God's name when we use it to curse people or things. The common expressions here are "God damn you" and "God damn this or that". Think about what these words actually mean. Someone who says, "God damn you" is calling upon the Lord – ordering him, really – to consign the victim of their verbal assault to the flames of hell forever. Thus they're usurping God's authority to judge and claiming to be a higher authority themselves. That alone is blasphemous. But think this through: in love God sent his Son to suffer and die to save people from hell. He doesn't wish that on anyone. It's Satan who wants to see people destroyed forever. Who's side are you on when you say, "God damn you" to someone?

We misuse God's name when we use it to swear or make an oath falsely. And let's be clear about what we mean here. There are occasions in life for which it's entirely appropriate to swear a solemn oath in the name of the Lord. Marriage is a good example. Before a couple exchanges vows to each other, they first make a promise to the Lord that they will love, honor, and cherish their spouse until they die. When I was ordained into the ministry, I took a solemn oath in the Lord's name to preach and teach according to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. If you were confirmed in the Lutheran Church, you made an oath in the Lord's name to remain faithful to your confession and suffer all, even death, rather than depart from it. The purpose of such swearing is twofold: first it indicates that the person making the oath understands the gravity of what they are promising to do and that they expect others to hold them accountable. Second, one who swears an oath in God's name is calling upon the Lord to bear witness and punish them if they fail to do what they promised. So, what's prohibited here

is not swearing an oath per se, but doing it falsely; that is swearing with no intention of keeping the oath from the beginning or changing your mind and backing out on it later.

Formerly it was common for people to swear in God's name when testifying in a court of law. It's against to Eighth Commandment to bear false witness, but in court, when giving testimony that might condemn someone or cause them to be punished, there was added the weight of the sacred oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And again, the idea was that the Lord was being called upon to listen to the testimony and punish the witness if they lied. At the trial of Jesus they produced a parade of witnesses who testified falsely under oath. Worse was that those in charge, who had taken sacred oaths to uphold justice, knew it and were egging them on. Those same judges then marched over to Pilate's court of law and made up a new set of false charges against Jesus because they knew the Roman governor wouldn't condemn Jesus on the charge of blasphemy. It's a bit ironic, isn't it, that they thought they were saving themselves by getting rid of Jesus while at the same time, through their conscious false swearing, they were knowingly calling down God's judgment upon themselves?

Moving on, we misuse God's name when we use it to lie and to deceive. The chief offense here is false doctrine. When a teacher in the church denies God's Word in whole or in part, when they twist or turn its meaning, or when they add to God's Word things that spring from their own sinful heart and mind, they are using God's name to deceive. And as Jesus makes clear in the passage we heard from John's Gospel, those who do so are doing the work of Satan who was a liar from the beginning. It was he who asked, "Did God really say ...?" and then flatly refuted the Lord's Word. You know the disaster that happened as a result.

Unfortunately, this is all too common. A few weeks ago another large protestant denomination in the US voted to redefine marriage. It's no longer the lifelong commitment between a man and woman that God designed it to be. No, now they say it's between any two people regardless of sex. Their pastors have the green light to officiate at wedding ceremonies uniting same sex couples. What God clearly calls an abomination, they are now calling upon him to bless. That is blasphemy of the highest order. And though they claim they are doing it for the sake of love for all people, there is nothing loving about endorsing soul destroying sin. The loving thing is to call sinners to repent, be forgiven, and turn from their sin.

Our own church body is not immune to this. One of the pastors on our roster teaches openly in favor of Darwinian evolution, women's ordination, and homosexuality among other things that are contrary to God's Word. He was rightly charged with teaching false doctrine. But on account of our convoluted dispute resolution process that seeks win-win solutions, and the theologically spineless members of the panel who heard the case, this pastor was cleared of all charges. Measures are being taken to correct the flaws in the system that allowed this to happen; but if they fail, this could be the proverbial camel's nose in our tent. Once false doctrine is tolerated, it's only a matter of time before it pushes the truth out completely.

All right, so far we've looked at the misuse of God's name. We now turn our attention to its proper use. In this regard, first let it be said that God gave us his name so that we would use it. The Jews at the time of Christ had the silly idea that the Lord's name was too holy to be spoken, so they used various substitutes instead. This, they imagined, had the added benefit of keeping them from violating the Second Commandment. If we never speak the Lord's name, we can't be accused of misusing it. This is nonsense. Why would God give us his name and want to be called something else? It should be obvious: not using the name God gave us to call him is another form of misusing it through avoidance. He wants us to use his name. That's why he gave it to us.

For what purpose? First and foremost for prayer. The Lord says, "Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you." He wants us to come to him with all of our cares, concerns, complaints, and desires. He is, after all, in charge of all things. He has the power to change whatever is going on in your life. And he invites us ask for what we want. And giving us his personal name is part of the invitation. It's like when you come to that point in a relationship when a superior says to you, "Stop calling me, Mr. Smith. From now on call me Bob." The Lord gives us his name so that we won't see him as a distant deity who's too busy to be bothered with us, but rather as our loving Father who cares deeply about every aspect of our lives.

And here we have Jesus as our prime example. Have you noticed how often in the Gospel accounts Jesus is found praying to his heavenly Father? It seems he's at it constantly. In the passion narrative especially, Jesus is almost always praying. He prays for Peter who is about to deny him, that he'll not fall into despair afterward, but be restored. In Gethsemane, he prays for all of his disciples, present and future, that they will be kept safe and faithful to his Word. He also prays that if there's any other way to save lost mankind, that he might be delivered from the hour of trial; but above all that his Father's will be done. On the cross, he prays for the forgiveness of those who are crucifying him.

The writer of Hebrews stresses Jesus' life of prayer, telling us that in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears ... and how he was heard because of his reverence. He indicates too that even now Jesus is pleading for us, and that having suffered in the flesh, he understands our weaknesses. He knows exactly what we need. Yet he continues to pray for us and for our good. How much more should we, who have so many problems – and sins, and temptations – be calling upon the name of the Lord asking for help? To neglect to do so is to misuse God's name. It shows that we don't trust him to hear and answer. It shows that we imagine our problems are too small to concern him or too big for him to fix. It shows that we don't believe what he's told us about himself and his great love for us. It shows that we do not understand how the Father sees us in Christ: not as undeserving sinners, but forgiven, washed, redeemed, made his holy children through the passion and death of his Son.

There's no question, to properly use God's name we should all be making greater use of the gift of prayer – and not just for help in times of need, but for all things. We need also to pray calling upon God's name to offer our thanks and praise to him, not because he needs them; but because we need to recognize him as the source of all things. Our prayers are part of trusting him as our one true God.

Good. In view of all that has been said, it's time for each of us to examine ourselves in the mirror of the Second Commandment. Take a good hard look and ask, "How have I been guilty of misusing God's most holy name? What idle words have escaped my mouth? What curses have I spoken? What sacred oaths have I broken? How have I encouraged or supported others to break their sacred oaths? What lies have I told? What false doctrines have I taught or believed? How have I failed to properly employ the gift of prayer? Let each of us recognize our guilt and confess it. And let us turn in faith to Christ who for us was crucified, who was forsaken by God for our sins so that we never will be, and who in dying for us commended himself into the hands of heavenly Father, and know for certain that for his sake we are forgiven of our sins and empowered by his Spirit to live according to his good and holy will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!