Book 8

Sunday June 3, 1979

"THE THIRD COMMANDMENT" Exodus 20:7, Matthew 5:33-37, 12:33-37

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold the person guiltless who takes God's name in vain."

Most people I suspect would say that the meaning of the third commandment has to do with profanity, specifically profanity that uses the name of God in connection with some other so-called cuss words. The commandment does carry this as one of its meanings, but in the beginning, it was not the primary focus of the third commandment and is not the main intention of the commandment today.

To properly understand the purpose of the third commandment, it is first necessary to come to terms with what the Hebrews understood or believed about the "name" of God. "You shall not take the NAME of the Lord your God in vain."

For the Hebrews and for many other people, a name was more than just a handy label by which to identify a person or thing. A name carried power! To the Hebrew mind, the name of the Lord was holy and powerful. A name was not only a title; the name itself had mystery, power and substance. Thus a name was never to be used carelessly.

The Bible is always careful to preserve a proper order about names; for to name someone or something was to assert that you had actual or potential power over that person or thing. In the story of creation, God names Adam and Eve, and they name the animals. Parents name their children. However in the Biblical story, no one could name God. Moses at one point has to ask God, "What name shall I give you? When the people asked me the name of the God who sent me, what shall I say?"

God's name was so holy, no one could even say it. It was written as an unpronounceable set of letters, YHWH, and when a Hebrew came upon that holy symbol in the scriptures, he did not read "Yahweh" or "Jehovah" as we do, but he said the word, "Adonai" which literally means, "My Lord." Hebrews were taught to say, Adonai when they came to the holy symbol, lest they defile the holy name of Yahweh by seeking to pronounce it.

In the Hebrew view of the world, one's name was associated with one's being. It was a clue to one's character. So in the Biblical story if your character changed, or if your life changed in a significant way, your name changed also. Abram becomes Abraham when he goes to a strange land and becomes the founder of a new people. When Jacob wrestled with the angel of God by the brook Jabar, his name is changed from Jacob to Israel, and his descendents are called children of Israel. When Saul saw the light on the road to Damascus and had his life turned around, he became Paul the Apostle.

Again, the point is that for the Hebrews, the name was a powerful symbol. When you called someone's name, you were claiming either superiority or equality. To have your name known by another was to reveal your character to another.

Names to us are also powerful symbols. When we say to someone, "tell me your name," we're asking that person to tell us something very personal about himself or herself. To name a thing or a person is to give it a measure of individuality. Naming a person gives that person a uniqueness, a character of his or her own. Even very young children realize this. Call them by the wrong name or mis-prounounce their name and they will correct you. Thus it is that we treasure our names and resent any mis-use of them. We like the see them properly spelled, prounounced and used. To deliberately have our names used in the wrong way or to have our names attached to some act or deed which is not ours is a personal affront to us and rightly so.

It's no wonder that our black brothers and sisters resented the slave names given them. These names did not represent the real persons they were. Similarly a grown man or woman, black or white does not like to be called "boy" or "girl." If you know my name then use it with respect.

On the positive side, salespeople and others find a special influence with potential customers when they can address them by name. To be named and to be recognized by a name symbolizes our individuality and dignity.

All of this helps explain the Hebrew attitude toward the name of God, the God who was mystery, the God who was ultimate, the God who was finally unknowable in total.

The Hebrews knew better than anyone that the being of God was finally beyond every image, and a name is also partly an image or symbol. Because of this, the Hebrews were at first reluctant to assign any name to God because no name or label could adequately all there is to God. So when a name was finally assigned to God, it was the custom at first not to display it or pronounce it openly.

It is not surprising therefore that one of the ten commandments deals with an attitude towards God's name. It was natural then for Jesus Christ to teach us in the Lord's Prayer to say "Hallowed be thy name."

But what does the commandment mean when it tells us not to take God's name in vain?

To begin with it means much more than being a prohibition against using God's name as a cuss word or expletive! The primary focus of the commandment is an injunction against perjury, against lying under oath.

According to the way a legal contract was made in ancient Israel, there was first of all a period of negotiation or bargaining. When an agreement was reached the two parties would clasp hands and swear in the name of the Lord that they would be true to their word, that they would abide by their contract. Thus if either party broke their word, or violated the contract; if either party did not live up to the oath, that person had taken the name of the Lord in vain. The name of God had been mis-used.

So the third commandment is saying--keep your word! Live up to contracts! Keep your promises! Don't swear in God's name to tell the truth or keep to your contract or promise and then not do it. That is to take God's name in vain.

Thus the Hebrews recognized that human honor and the ability to trust the integrity and word of another were critical necessities in the life of a healthy society. Without this basic reality, life itself becomes no longer trustworthy. If we can no longer believe what people tell us, then life falls apart. Falsehood, deceit, cover-ups, broken promises, and outright lies in the private or public arena, shatter relationships and tear at the very fabric of society.

Truth and the integrity of one's word are essential to the hope of a nation, and the leaders of that nation must

embody truth and integrity or the nation is morally bankrupt. Ability alone is not enough. Integrity is also required for the health of the people. A nation or society in which truth cannot be assumed cannot long endure.

Frankly, my friends, that was the basic problem of Watergate a few years ago, and it is part of the basic problem in our society now. Take the energy situation, for example. One of main problems is lack of trust and belief. No one believes anyone. Ask most people and they will say that as soon as gasoline gets over a dollar a gallon, there will be lots available and not because people are buying less.

We don't believe the government, we don't trust the oil companies. Part of the problem in the 1960's with the Viet Nam war was the lack of credibility. Body counts were falsified. We were told we were winning the war and we were not. We were told reasons for being in the war which were later proved false.

It's not surprising that in today's world comedians and others make jokes about the biggest lies. According to one source the three biggest lies today are: (1) the check is in the mail (2) A young man saying to his girl friend, "Don't worry, honey, if anything happens, I'll marry you," (3) We're from the government and we're here to help you.

But lack of trust, the breaking of one's word is not only a government or corporation problem--it's a personal problem as well. The basic issue of the third commandment is the integrity of one's word when spoken in the name of the Lord. However Jesus Christ took the commandment one big step further. He said we are to be the kind of people who keep our word whether or not we give it in the name of the Lord.

His commentary on the third commandment was: "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn, but I say to you, Do not swear at all (that is, do not take an oath). Let what you say be simply Yes or No; anything more than that comes from evil. Be the kind of persons who simply do what you say your are going to do."

In other words, it shouldn't everybe necessary to say--"I swear on a stack of Bibles," or "scout's honor," or "cross my heart and hope to die." As a Christian your word

is good, under oath or not under oath. This has some startling implications. If you say in your marriage vows, "I take this woman to be my wife and will be faithful to her alone," it means just that, being faithful. "I promise to love and sustain you in the bonds of marriage from this day forward, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, till death shall part us." It doesn't mean "I promse to love and sustain you as long as I feel like it."

This commandment meddles in our lives at every turn. It says keep your word. Dozens of people solemnly pledge to give a certain amount of money to support the church and then simply don't live up to their word. They have money for all sorts of other things and many of them not necessities. The world is filled with broken promises.

In the baptismal vows, parents solemnly promise in the name of the Lord to bring their children up as Christians, and many simply don't keep their word.

The third commandment and Jesus' commentary on it, is about our basic integrity. Can we be trusted to do what we say we are going to do? It judges all of us.

We take God's name in vain in so many ways! We profess to live in obedience to God's will, but then live as if there were no God. We take the name of God in vain when we say we love God and then hate other human beings. We take God's name in vain when we pray to God and then go about our living as if God did not exist as soon as we have finished our prayers.

And there is yet another and vicious way in which we take the name of God in vain. We take God's name in vain when we claim to have God's approval and support for those of our own attitudes and actions which are or may be in contradiction to God's will. To put it another way, we take God's name in vain when we put God's signature under our own plans.

Thus Christians and others have often in God's name indiscriminately claimed the authority and support of God for cruel and needless wars of conquest, for irresponsible and un-neighborly foreign policies, for unscrupulous political shenanigans, for indefensible class bigotry and race prejudice; so often we use God's name to justify our own actions.

People have used God's name to justify capital punishment--that's blasphemy. I've heard people say, "God made people in different races and therefore God intends them to remain segregated," that too is plain blasephemy.

Too often we quickly say, "It's God's will that it be this way," without having given much thought or study to what God's will might actually be.

Thus the third commandment warns us to be more careful in our judgments. I have often thought that the people who are always so sure that what they are doing is the Lord's business have a remarkable arrogance.

What the third commandment calls for then is integrity. It asks that a person's profession be substantiated by the person's performance. It warns aginst the tragedy of taking the name of God in word and in the observance of religious rites while denying and desecrating it in our deeds. Thus the writer of the letter of I John said, "LIttle children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth."

The third commandment is asking us to take God seriously. Either God matters or God does not matter. To use the name and idea of God and then to live as if God did not matter, that is taking God's name in vain. Amen.