

Ten Rules for Life | Third Commandment: What's in a Name? | Exodus 20:7

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Lee | The Falls Church Anglican

Preaching Draft | February 1, 2026

(Discussion questions on page 14)

Intro:

- One of my favorites TV shows is called “Finding Your Roots” on PBS.
- For those who are not familiar, it’s a show where a Harvard scholar, Dr. Henry Gates uses genealogical research and DNA analysis to uncover the family histories of celebrities and other influential people.
- And it’s fascinating to see the reactions of the guests when they discover either a family scandal or on the positive side, a link to someone heroic or influential in history; as well as the surprise when they find out they are related to someone completely unexpected.
- Who knew that Pope Leo XIV is the 9th cousin removed from Madonna, Angelina Jolie, Justin Bieber, Chris Pratt, and Hillary Clinton? Imagine the family reunion!
- But one of the other key takeaways from the show is just how important people’s “names” are; in particular, their “family” names.
- Because their names and their family names aren’t just a “title” or something that identifies who they are, but it connects them to something deeper, something far more significant, and reveals in a sense, how they became who they are.
- Well, in the Bible, “names” carried even more weight and more significance.
- Because a person’s name not only identified who that person was, but it represented that person’s character, destiny, and relationship with God.

- *For instance*, we see this in the way that God changed the name of “Abram” to “Abraham”, or “Jacob” to “Israel,” or “Simon” to “Peter,” or “Saul” to “Paul,”
- But even more important than a “**person’s**” name in the Bible was of course God’s name, which He revealed to Moses in **Exodus Chapter 3** as “Yahweh,” or “I am who I am.”
- And God’s name was SO important that He included in the top three of the 10 commandments the command that **everyone** for **all time** must NEVER “take the Lord’s name in vain,” or as other translations puts it, to never “MISUSE” the name of God.
- Why? Because like the names of “people” in the Bible, God’s “name” wasn’t just a “title,” but God’s name was connected to His very nature, being, and person.
- Doug Stuart, a professor and commentator noted: *“To speak Yahweh’s name was to recognize his power and holiness and even invite his response to one’s situation.”*
- So, God’s name was beyond “special.” So much so that orthodox Jews won’t even say the name of God out loud. Instead of Yahweh, worshippers say “Hashem,” which means “the name.”
- And this is why at the end of the third commandment in **verse 7, of Exodus 20**, God says that those who do NOT obey this command WILL be held accountable.
- It’s not clear exactly what the punishment will be, whether it’s referring to something in this life or the life to come, but the point is that everyone who does not obey this command WILL be held accountable.
- It’s a SERIOUS offence.

- That's why in **Leviticus 24:16** people who "blasphemed" the name of God were stoned to death.
- But the question is, and the question for us this morning is: What does it really MEAN "to NOT take the Lord's name in vain," especially in today's context? What exactly is God prohibiting here?
- And just as important, what does this mean for us today? That is, how do we apply this to daily life?
- Well, these are the two questions I want to explore with us this morning.

I. **What does this command MEAN?**

- So, let's begin with the first question: What does this command mean?

1. **Contemporary Meaning:**

- Well, I think that many of us, including myself, when we initially read or hear about this command, we immediately think it means to just make sure to NOT use the name of God, or Jesus, or Christ, as a substitute swear word when we are surprised or angry about something.
- And unfortunately, this is pervasive in society. In so many TV shows and movies, when people play sports, or just hang out with others, how often do we hear the name of Jesus, or the word, "God", or "Christ" thrown around so casually as part of people's profanity vocabulary.
- God's name and the name of Jesus have just become a substitute swear word.
- I think for many this is the contemporary understanding of this command: Just make sure you don't use God's name in this way.

- *But is this what this command is really talking about? Is THIS the MAIN prohibition?*
- Well, yes, this is ONE of the prohibitions of this command. We should NOT be throwing around God's name, or the name of Jesus, as simply another swear word. Because this is utterly disrespectful and dishonoring to God.
- *However*, when you look throughout the Old Testament, and how this command was understood by the people back in Moses' time, it had a broader and deeper meaning than just flippantly using God's name as profanity.
- Because the literal translation of this verse is: "*You shall not take up the name of Yahweh your God to worthlessness.*"
- *In other words*, it's not just about "misusing" God's name, or even about being superstitious about "saying" the name of God, "Yahweh," but it is about saying or using God's name in an empty, frivolous, or worthless, way.
- Specifically, when you look at the Old Testament, there were at least five different ways God's name was treated as "worthless," that this command was broken.

2. The OT Meaning:

a. False Oaths:

- *First*, as **Leviticus 19:12** reveals, to take the Lord's name in vain included making "false oaths." As it says: "*You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.*"
- In other words, perjury, or lying under oath, was one way to "take the Lord's name in vain."

- But it also included making false promises.
- *For example*, someone might say, “I swear to Yahweh that if He does such and such for me, I will do this...” BUT, never intending to follow through with it.

b. Mocking/Blaspheming:

- This command also prohibited “mocking” or “blaspheming” God’s name. That is, cursing God or speaking “evil of God” as we see in **Numbers 21:5**.

c. False Visions and Prophecies:

- But it also included making “false prophecies” or sharing “fake visions” claiming it was from God when in fact, it wasn’t.

d. Insincere Prayer:

- But then it went far deeper than words because to “take the Lord’s name in vain” ALSO included offering prayers, IN the name of God, that was INSINCERE.
- In other words, NOT really meaning what you were praying, and NOT praying what you meant.
- It was praying to God in a frivolous, insincere way. So, it was also about the attitude of our hearts.

e. Dishonoring Behavior:

- And lastly, it was a prohibition against behavior that would dishonor or defame God.

- One specific example was God telling Moses in **Lev. 22:2** “*Speak to Aaron and his sons so that they abstain from the holy things of the people of Israel, which they dedicate to me, so that they do not profane my holy name: I am the Lord.*”
- So, in other words, this command wasn't JUST a prohibition against irreverently using God's name when as a swear word, but it was about dishonoring and making God's name “worthless” by the things we said, the way we represented ourselves on God's behalf, the sincerity of our hearts when we prayed and worshipped God, and ultimately, the way we lived our lives as followers of God.
- So, to “misuse” the name of God, was ***to dishonor God and drag his name through the mud with our words, our attitude, and our actions.***
- THIS is what God was prohibiting. Much deeper than just using God's name as a substitute swear word.
- **Connect:**
- *But, what does this look like in today's context? In what ways can we, even as followers of Jesus, intentionally or unintentionally break this command today – other than the most obvious way which is using God's name as profanity?*

1. Words:

a. False visions/prophecies:

- Well, even today, this command is broken when people share false visions or false prophecies: Claiming that what they heard or saw was 100% from God even though it really wasn't.

b. False teaching:

- But along the same lines, people misuse the Name of God today through false teachings, and Paul wrote at length about the dishonor that false teachers and false teaching bring towards God.

c. Rash Vows or Commitments:

- We see this command also being broken in the making of rash vows or commitments, maybe that we make when we're in bad situation: promising to live differently if God gets us out of a jam, even though we may not really mean it.

2. Attitude/Heart:

a. Insincere prayer and worship:

- But there are more subtle ways that we can at times can break this command.
- *For instance*, we may pray prayers or sing songs in an insincere way. Not really meaning what we say or sing or saying or singing what we really mean. Or just mindlessly praying or singing going through the routine without really thinking about it.
- And Jesus Himself addressed this issue in **Matthew 15**, when he talked about the super-religious folks of his day when he said: *“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”*
- As one commentator noted, this prohibition is a prohibition against “phoniness,” that is, just merely going through the ‘motions’ of worship, trivializing our approach to God, or using prayer like a ‘good-luck charm.’

3. Actions/Behavior:

a. Hypocritical Living:

- But as I mentioned, this command goes beyond just our words or even the attitude of our hearts, because it's ultimately through our behavior and actions that can drag God's name through the mud.
- **Titus 1:16** speaks of this when it says: "*They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him.*"
- And as Paul said in **Romans 2:24**, "*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*"
- And here Paul is referring to the actions of some in the church who don't really 'walk the walk.'
- As he points out in **verse 21-23**: These folks "preach that people should not steal, but they themselves steal," or preach that people shouldn't commit adultery, but they themselves commit adultery.
- In other words, we defame the name of God, misuse it, and treat it as worthless, when we live lives in a hypocritical way.

(Transition)

- So, that's the "meaning" of this third commandment and these are the prohibitions.
- *But how do we actually apply this in our daily life? Is it just about trying to avoid saying or doing these bad things? Or is there a positive "prescription" and application to this command?*

II. **What does this MEAN for me? Application/Prescription:**

- Like every commandment in the 10 Commandments, there's not only a "prohibition" that God gives to "avoid" certain things, but there is also a positive "prescription" to "do" things that fulfill the command.

- And Jesus Himself gives the PRESCRIPTION to this command in the Lord's Prayer.
- As Jesus tells us to pray in **Matthew 6:9** "*Hallowed be Thy name.*"
- And to "hallow" God's name simply means to "treat God's name with the highest regard and reverence."
- It's to give worth, honor, and praise that God deserves.
- That's the **prescription**.
- *So, the question is: How do we "hallow" God's name? How do we treat God's name in a way that gives Him the highest praise and honor?*
- Well, it's simply to do the opposite of what is prohibited, and these are a few of the practical applications for us today.

1. Give Priority to Praise and Thanksgiving:

- *For instance*, instead of misusing God's name by using His name as a substitute swear word, our lips are to be filled with praise and worship of God.
- That involves the daily practice of giving thanks for who God is and all that He has done for us.
- And this is something that I've had to learn over the years because at times I can focus on the problems and the negative things in life. And I can easily become a person who grumbles and complains when things don't work out the way I want.
- This is why, spending the first moments of each day, and spending a significant part of my devotions with God just focused on praise and Thanksgiving is so helpful.

- Because when I can BEGIN the day giving thanks for who God is and what He has done; the good and beautiful life He's given: My good and beautiful family, friends, roof over my head, food on the plate, clothes on my back, and myriad of other blessings, my words become filled with praise instead of complaining.
- And this is when I begin to really "Hallow" God's Name.
- Maybe this is something that all of us can begin to practice in our daily life: To begin the day and begin our prayers simply with "thanksgiving."

2. Offer Sincere Prayer and Worship:

- Secondly, another way to "hallow" God's name instead of "misusing" it is to simply be more intentional about MEANING what we say or sing in prayer and worship and saying what we MEAN.
- And I know it's a simple application, but how often we can pray or sing mindlessly or just out of routine instead of being honest in our prayers and worship.
- Because what God desires is our sincerity. He doesn't need to be impressed by our prayers and He definitely doesn't want us to just go through the routine.
- And sometimes the best prayer is the prayer, "I don't really feel like praying God, but help me to pray," or, "I don't really believe the words of the song that we're singing right now, but help me to believe."
- And if you want an example, just look at the prayers of David throughout the Psalms. David is brutally honest with God, and this is one of the reasons God calls David a man after His own heart.

3. See God as He truly is:

- The third application is to try and SEE God as He TRULY is.
- Specifically, what God desires from us, and the way we “hallow” God’s name is to see Him not only as a loving, tender, Father, but also as a Holy, Righteous, Creator who is to be revered.
- And we need to keep that balance; to see God in ALL facets of His character.
- As Jesus teaches us in the Lord’s Prayer, we are to both see God as “Father,” or “Abba,” “daddy,” with all of God’s gentleness, grace, and love, AND as the One who rules and reigns over the Universe, “thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.”
- I think this gets at the heart of WHY God gives this commandment in the first place.
- Because as Sam talked about, the first four of the 10 Commandments is all about our relationship with God and how we are to fulfill the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.
- And the way we really love God is not just by having no other God’s before Him, and not putting other things above God, but about seeing and treating God as He truly is – as He truly deserves.
- Because if we really saw God as He truly is, one who is both Holy, Righteous, Powerful, AND one who is gracious, loving, and faithful, then the way we speak, the way we pray, and the way we live will begin to reflect that truth.
- And we will WANT to live in a way that reveres Him, that honors Him, that “hallows” His name.

- And I think this is something that ALL of us at times needed to be reminded of.
- We all need at times a spiritual “lens” correction.
- As one of my friends reminded me, we need to have the balanced perspective that Jesus was both the SAFEST person on the planet as well as the HOLIEST person on the planet.
- That even tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners felt safe with Jesus because He was so full of grace and love.
- Yet, Jesus was without sin, completely holy and righteous, the one who was transfigured, the one who overturned tables when God’s name was not honored, and the one who the book of Revelation describes as having flames of fire – the alpha and omega – beginning and the end.
- And that it is before Jesus that every knee will bow in Heaven and on earth.
- We need to see Jesus as one who on the one hand showed deep compassion to the woman caught in adultery in **John Chapter 8**, but also as the one who told her to leave her life of sin.
- This is how we make sure to “hallow” His name.
- Because it’s when we can see God as both SAFE and HOLY; full of grace AND truth; both the “Abba” Father and the Creator King that we will be able to speak, pray, and live in a way that honors Him.
- And of course, it was ultimately on the cross where we see both the grace AND the holiness of God displayed.
- Thus, for us this morning, do WE need a spiritual lens correction when it comes to seeing God for who He really is?

- Is there maybe an unbalance between viewing God as both HOLY and SAFE; as both full of GRACE but also TRUTH?
- Something for us to think about this week.

4. Livie lives that honor God's name:

- Well, the last application, or prescription I want to mention for this third commandment is that we “hallow” God’s name by simply living a life that glorifies Him.
- As **Colossians 3:17** reminds us: “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*”

- Kevin DeYoung, in his book on the 10 Commandments puts it this way:

We obey the third commandment by living as Christians, by speaking and doing everything according to the family name. For when we do all that we do—and do it in Christ, for Christ, and through Christ—we show that his is the name we value, the name we love, and the name that is above all names.

DeYoung, Kevin. The Ten Commandments: What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them (Foundational Tools for Our Faith) (p. 57).

- Because it’s ultimately through the WAY we live, not just our words and attitude, that we can either “take the Lord’s name in vain,” or “Hallow” His name.

○ Conclusion/Gospel:

- But as I close, what’s more important to note is that there is NO way we can obey this third commandment on our own.

- Because as Sam shared in the beginning of the series, one of the purposes of the Law of God is to become a mirror for us, to show us where we fall short of God's glory, SO THAT it can drive us to Jesus.
- Because it's only when we realize that we can't perfectly obey God, but that Jesus did, and by trusting in HIM and leaning on HIM and asking for HIS grace and power, we can now begin to fulfill these commands.
- And that's the final application of this command: It's recognizing that though we can't, Jesus did. But when we turn and trust in Him, and depend on Him, He will give us the grace and power to live in a way that "hallows" God's name.

Discussion Questions Suggestions (Please feel free to use your own questions)

- Question 1: *In light of the Old Testament understanding of this command, in what ways does society, and even Christians, "misuse" God's name (i.e. take the Lord's name in vain)?*
- Question 2: *Why do you think this command is so important to God?*
- Question 3: *In what ways does our "spiritual lenses" need correcting as it relates to the character of God (e.g. Do we need to see more clearly God's holiness or His tender mercy?)?*
- Question 4: *What other applications can you draw from this command?*