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The 10 Commandments – “The Law of Respect”

Isaiah 55: 6-9

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.

⁷Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.

⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Leviticus 22:31-33

Thus you shall keep my commandments and observe them: I am the LORD. You shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel: I am the LORD; I sanctify you, I who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD.

Last week we began our summer worship series on the 10 commandments, based on Joan Chitister’s resource, *The Laws of the Heart*. Over the summer, we’ll be taking an in depth look at each of these ten guiding principles of our faith – at what they meant for the Israelite people in their early days, but also how they impact our own lives. Do they still apply to us today, and if so, how? How can these historical statutes transform our faith and our lives even today, thousands of years after their origin.

Last week, we delved into the first commandment, “I am the Lord your God”, and “you shall have no other God’s before me,” focusing on what it means to make God primary in our lives... to ensure all the other little “g” gods that vie for our attention, like money and power, don’t take over and rule our lives.

This week we turn to our second commandment, "You shall not take God's name in vain." For most of my life, I thought this was all about swearing – in both meanings of the word... first, cursing... not using God or Jesus's name as profanity – and second, oath taking – invoking God's name to promise you're not lying, when in reality you might be... saying, "I swear to God, I didn't do it!" I've grown to realize that this commandment is about so much more! In its fullness, it is about properly revering and respecting not only God's name, but God's character as well, and not twisting it for our own purposes.

Let's talk first about what's in a name. According to Shakespeare, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," but Anne of Green Gables has trouble believing that "a rose WOULD be as nice if it was called a thistle or a skunk cabbage." A name is more than simply letters and syllables... In ancient cultures, naming was meant to reveal the very essence of a thing, or to endow a person with the characteristics implied by the name itself. A name could indicate someone's purpose, role, significance, or power in the community. If you think through our Biblical story, every great call of God is marked by the giving of a new name... Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul... all of which are meant to signal a new role, task, or position within the community. Names have always had meaning, and they still do. Native Americans name their children for the animal spirit or energy they see in them... they'll call their children Running Bear, Brave Hunter, Peaceful Dove.

In the book of Exodus, when God is calling Moses to confront the Pharaoh and ask that he let the Israelite slaves go, Moses asks, "Who shall I say sent me? What name should I give them?" And God answers Moses, "I am who am" "I am being" "I am life" "I am the creator of your life and all that is." Is that enough for you? Will that give you enough credibility to demand the liberation of my people?

"I am who am", "I am life"... of all the names and words we could use as profanity, why would we ever use God's name, the God of all life, other than to disrespect or cast aside God's importance. When we use something in vain, we're using it in an empty, idle, insincere, and frivolous way. "O my God!" "God dammit!" "Jesus Christ!" Used as expletives or throw away words, they eat away at the reverence we hold for God.

And this happens not only when we use God's name to swear, but also when we misuse the name of God for our own sake and purposes. When we coopt God's will and claim that God wills and supports our desires and causes, even when it hurts or keeps others down. When we use God's name to curse or condemn those with different points of view, saying that WE know God's heart, and THAT'S not it! --- People use God and God's word in scripture to back their views and maintain their power --- "Women shouldn't be ordained, or lead a country... it's in the Bible that women should be silent and submissive to men... God wants it to be that way."

We use God's name to destroy one another... but God wouldn't do that! God is about love, mercy, grace, salvation, and liberation. We misuse the name of God to damn, and exclude the other when we say things like "God hates communists, or Japanese, or gays, or feminists, or whomever". We twist God's word, cherry picking only the few verses that support our position, while leaving the rest on the cutting room floor, then claiming a

scriptural command to “obey the laws of the government because God has ordained them for the purpose of order.” We put words in God’s mouth, so to speak, using them as a weapon, rather than a blessing. We put ourselves in the place of God... we claim to know the mind of God and we impose it on others.

We take God’s name in vain when we quote scripture at people like it’s a weapon and claim the discussion is over. We use God’s name to manipulate God as we pray, “Dear God, we pray, punish “these people” for their sins.” We use God’s name to avoid facing our own inadequacies. We ask God to do for us what we should be doing for ourselves... like eliminating nuclear weapons, God didn’t make nuclear weapons, we did, we can eliminate them whenever we want, we just obviously don’t want to. And we want God to feed the starving... we have all the chemistry and biology it will take to feed everyone on the planet, we just lack the political will. We want God to bring peace when we carry war in our hearts, and so we think we’ve done enough. I prayed for that. We use God’s name to damn people to hell. We make God an instrument of our punishment, to justify our prejudices, to make God responsible for those we hate, or enslave or vilify.

The second commandment tells us to leave God out of our arguments. Take your position, and be willing to live into, don’t blame it on God. Almost every major act of destruction in history has been done while calling on the name of God for its legitimation... the crusades, the witch burnings, slavery, apartheid, and the holocaust... we lined up all God’s reasons for destroying God’s people, and no one said a word about breaking the 2nd commandment when we did it. To preach that women or any minority or group of people are not supposed to be equal to white men because God made it that way, is surely and certainly to take God’s name in vain.

I wonder how many times I have misused God’s name by praying for things that feed my desires—even if it’s at the expense of others—and capping it off with a quick, “In Jesus name, Amen.” To pray “In Jesus Name” is not some sort of spiritual abracadabra wherein God must comply with our prayers because we have said the magic formula. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, the first thing he taught them to say was “Hallowed be your name” (Matt. 6:9). Above all else, our lives are to reflect the holiness of the character of God, in our words, in our prayers, in our actions, and our relationships.

As we go into our week, I invite us all to think carefully about how we intentionally or unintentionally misuse the name of God, twisting God’s desires to resemble our own. This second commandment reminds and encourages us to respect God for who God is, rather than who we want or claim God to be. As we live out this law of respect, may not only our lives be a blessing of God’s love and mercy, but may the world we live in continue to be transformed into the Kingdom of God, bringing hope, empowerment, and liberation for all. Amen.