

# Honor God's Name

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**Sermon Series:**  
**Deuteronomy**

**Deuteronomy 5:11**  
**Matthew 7:21-23**

***Names do more than distinguish you from the person sitting next to you. Names contain the possibility of relationship, tell us to whom things belong and tell us who has authority.***

Names are pretty important things...otherwise we'd live in a confusing world of "Hey, you!" We put our names on lots of things. We come to a church or business event and fill out the "Hello, My Name Is..." These name tags are important, for the moment you address someone by name, a gathering of strangers becomes a place where you belong. Most of us remember the lyrics from the television show *Cheers* - "Where everybody knows your name and they're really glad you came." Calling someone by name begins a relationship. That's why we ask you to greet one another *by name* at the end of worship.

We also put our names on things we want returned to us in case they get lost. The very front page of most of our DayTimers™ has our name and address on it. That information page with your name on it tells everyone that planner is yours—and that's a good thing, as any of you who have left your DayTimer on the top of your car and driven off will know.

Another thing with names on it is that official ID badge. This kind of naming device tells everyone who's authorized to do something or allowed in or who's responsible to see that things get done.

Names do more than distinguish you from the person sitting next to you. Names contain the possibility of relationship, tell us to whom things belong and tell us who has authority. These are important things to remember as we think this morning about the Third Commandment, which tells us to honor God's name.

Now, what exactly does it mean to honor God's name? We are really familiar with the old King James Version of this commandment that tells us not to take the name of the Lord our God

in vain. We have taken that to mean that we shouldn't use God's name as a swear word. You know, I wish every time I heard the name of Jesus that it would be in prayer. I hear it used passionately as people give vent to their frustrations, but I'm not really sure the prayers that might be prayed at that point are prayers we'd want answered.

And, even as I wish I didn't have to hear the Lord's name taken so lightly, I can't recall ever hearing the names of *other* deities used in the same way. I don't often hear "Krishna" or "Isis" when someone smashes his thumb with a hammer. We do hear atheists ask the God they don't think exists to condemn people to a hell they don't believe in. It seems as if people swear by what they fear might really be true, even if they don't want it to be.

Now, those of us who were raised in strict environments were just not permitted to use the Lord's name in vain, so we searched for substitutes such as "Judas Priest." But a lot of the phrases we use without even thinking came about as substitutes for God or Jesus swearing. Phrases such as "jeepers creepers," "for goodness' sake" and even "gosh" and "golly" are still considered by some Christians as unacceptable, because you actually mean to take the Lord's name in vain. I have a friend whose mom is still upset whenever he uses "dang" or "dagnabbit."

My husband and I went to a Christian college and the favorite substitute at that time was Maher-Shal-Al-Hashbaz, one of Isaiah's sons. It took so long to remember it and then say it that by the time you were finished, you had forgotten what you were angry about. Scripture is clear—we do need to be careful about the language that we use, for words are powerful and can hurt not only the one

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who hears them but also the one who speaks them. But if the command to honor God's name were just a matter of speech, keeping it would be easy. But the command is not just about speech.

Again, the King James Version gives us the familiar language—to not use the Lord's name in vain. Something is vain when it is empty of meaning or of no good or lasting purpose. Earlier commentators on this verse cautioned against using God's name flippantly, but they also said that you should not use God's name to conjure up things. Now we're getting closer to what it means to *use* the Lord's name. The New Revised Standard Version that we read earlier tells us that we are not to *make wrongful* use of the Lord's name.

We all use other people's names. Just this last week, I needed to interview a professor from a South African university. I was afraid that he wouldn't take a call from me, so I told him that a mutual friend suggested that I get in touch with him. That opened doors. But we can abuse the use of someone else's name that way, and when we do it in a vain way, a way to get something selfishly for ourselves, we call it name-dropping. Not that name-dropping would ever occur to anyone in Washington, D.C.

There are other ways in which people's names are misused. I know you've seen those identity theft commercials from Citibank, where the voice of the thief comes out of the mouth of the victim of the theft. In one commercial, a husky guy sitting on a lawn tractor talks in a high-pitched voice. After talking about all the ritzy things she bought, she says, "I know it's wrong, but I do not care. I feel like the prettiest girl in the whole development." The commercials are funny, but identity theft isn't, and it's in the news a lot these days...people using other people's names to get what they want.

You worry about identity theft, because it's just not your name that's being stolen, it is everything about you that authorizes your resources: cash,

credit, access codes, to make things happen. *Your name is power.*

And that's exactly how the Hebrews understood the name of God. In fact, the names of all gods were supposed to have power to get things done. You used a god's name to conjure up what you wanted: good crops, a dead enemy, wealth. But when God gathered his children in the wilderness and gave them these commands, he told them that they were going to be a different kind of people. Remember last week's sermon on the Sabbath? God's people were to be marked as a people who valued God's creation so much that they would give it rest one day in seven. They were not to be known as those who exploit others.

Just so they would not be a people who tried to manage and manipulate their God. Just a side note here: are you beginning to see how the Ten Commandments were a *gift*? When you read the Old Testament, the writers will often say that the law of God is a *delight*. Why? Because it told them who they were. That's one of the ways you learned who you were, when you were growing up and tried some of the stunts your friends were getting away with, your folks would say, "Maybe that's how they do things down the street, but we're Andersons and we don't do those things."

So, now, another marker for the people of God is that, unlike the cultures around them, they will not use God. As a matter of fact, God will use *them*. God's name is not a tool or a magic incantation. God's name is not access to privilege. They will bear God's name, and they will not use it in vain. And the opposite of using something in vain is to take it seriously.

Well, just exactly what does it mean to take God's name seriously? That leads to another question—just what is God's name? You'd think it would be, well, "God." But, when we look at the conversation between God and Moses in the beginning of the book of Exodus, and Moses asks God his name, God tells him

***No, the boast is on the sensational and spectacular, not on the humble and everyday requirements of the will of God to be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness. Who in the world would notice that kind of stuff, except those closest to you?***

***Martin Luther described those successful folk as always “busier and more energetic... than the genuine Christians.” This is because they are working for Jesus and not under Jesus. They are using the name of Jesus for their own purposes.***

that His name is “I am who I am.” This is what we in English read as Jahweh... it’s four letters in the Hebrew, and when the Hebrew scribes came to this name of God in the manuscripts they were copying, they would stop everything, bathe all over and then write the name with a brand new pen. That’s taking God’s name seriously!

*I am who I am.* This is one of the ways to translate Jahweh. But it is also translated as “I will be who I will be.” The first way is firm and substantial—just what we would expect of God. But the second way tells us how this God is different from all the other pagan gods. He will be who he will be—he will not be managed or shaped by anyone other than himself. If names contain the possibility of relationship, tell us to whom things belong and tell us who has authority, then the name of God is serious business, because we’re not just dealing with a label, we’re dealing with God himself. And how we use God’s name puts God’s reputation, character and authority on the line.

And that brings us to our New Testament passage from the Sermon on the Mount. When we read through the whole sermon, we realize that following the ethic of Jesus is much more than a matter of what we do or refrain from doing. It is a matter of what we are thinking on the inside, as well as a matter of what we are actually doing. For example, Jesus says, “You have heard it said do not murder, but I say to you, don’t even be angry with someone.” Jesus is saying that what we do must come from a pure heart. And we know, each and every day, that our hearts are not what they should be. They must be changed, and only God can do that.

Now, Jesus comes to this part of the sermon. Jesus is chastising people who are doing great things in his name. They have successful ministries. In Jesus’ name, they preached great sermons and proclaimed the word of God. In Jesus’ name, they cast out demons. In Jesus’

name they did other deeds of great power. Their ministries were effective. This is hard to hear, because we want to do things in the name of Christ. We want effective Christian ministries—we want to feed the poor, come alongside the helpless and heal the sick. We want to make things right in the name of Jesus. We want to make a difference for Christ. What Jesus is condemning sounds like a strategic plan for any ministry.

So what is going on here? As Dale Bruner says in his commentary on this passage, “The air roils with the impressive.” Lord, in your name *we did thus and so*. Notice that they didn’t say, “Lord, in your name I kept my marriage vows... Lord, in your name I was able to love my enemy... I was able to control my anger.” No, the boast is on the sensational and spectacular, not on the humble and everyday requirements of the will of God to be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness. Who in the world would notice that kind of stuff, except those closest to you?

Martin Luther described those successful folk as always “busier and more energetic... than the genuine Christians.” This is because they are working *for* Jesus and not *under* Jesus. They are using the *name* of Jesus for their own purposes. They have taken what belongs to God and set their own agenda. This is an important word to us as a congregation. It reminds us to be careful that we don’t set up our plans for ministry, even things that we know God wants done in this world, and then run off on our own, for even if we use the name of Jesus, we can be very far from him.

And that’s the point of this text. I have always wondered why Jesus says to these people, “I never knew you.” I thought it made more sense for him to say “You never knew me.” After all, if they had *really* known Jesus, they wouldn’t have gotten it all wrong, right? But Jesus says, “I never knew you.” What’s he talking about?

***Call upon  
God's name in  
prayer as you  
seek to know  
him and be  
shaped by Him.  
Give credit to  
God for all the  
things He has  
done...a  
grateful life is  
a life that takes  
God's name  
seriously. The  
credit belongs  
to Him, not to  
us.***

***Let God set the  
agenda for  
your life and  
live under His  
authority...  
don't steal His  
identity, living  
as if what  
belongs to God  
is yours.***

Well, I think what has happened is that they are so busy running around with their great works for God that they haven't slowed down enough to be still and be in relationship with the Lord they claim to serve. They never gave Jesus a chance to know them. They used the Lord's name in vain. Remember how we said at the beginning that a name holds the potential for a relationship? They were so busy using the Lord's name in order to make a name for themselves that they ignored the Lord who gave them that name. That's why the Sabbath command follows this command. Sit down and be still, not only so that you can know God, but so the Lord can know you.

Honor God's name...take it seriously...don't use it in vain. In view of the prohibitions, it might seem safe just to ignore it, but that would be wrong, as well. The law God gives does not just tell us what not to do. It also implies what we are to do. It guides us. So, we are to use God's name. We are to use it in ways that honor him and accomplish his will. Call upon God's name in prayer as you seek to know him and be shaped by Him. Give credit to God for all the things He has done. A grateful life is a life that takes God's name seriously. The credit belongs to Him, not to us. Let God set the agenda for your life and live under His authority. Don't steal His identity, living as if what belongs to God is yours.

How did the early Christians honor God's name? They were nothing but a small religious group to begin with. But, as plagues began to sweep the cities of the Roman Empire, the wealthy and successful fled the urban areas. Who stayed behind to care for the dying and bury the dead? The little-known people known by the name of an obscure prophet. But the way they bore that name in the midst of a suffering world led people to take that name seriously, and Jesus' name became known to the ends of the known world...from where the sun rose to where it set.

And remember this: in your baptism, you are marked with the name of Christ and placed in the family that bears his name. It is a relationship created out of the love of God, so honor God's name by learning to live in the family and bear the family resemblance out into the world so that the world will know what the psalmist knows, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" So, as you live, speak and work for the sake of Christ, honor God's name.

