

Bad Language

By David Feddes

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. (Exodus 20:7)

It's one of the world's most serious problems, but a lot of people don't take it seriously at all. It is absolutely deadly, and yet many think it's no big deal. The problem I'm talking about is bad language, especially the misuse of God's name.

You might be thinking, "Come on! We've got AIDS and crime and homelessness and drugs and child abuse and wars, and you're worried about some off-color words here and there? If you want to talk about something important, fine. But cleaning up our language? That's the least of our problems! They're only words." Let me mention another matter that seems pretty small compared to the really "big" problems: graffiti--spray painting things on buildings or subways. If you had to identify the most serious problem in our cities, graffiti wouldn't be at the top of the list. Gangs, drugs, unemployment, teen pregnancy, gun control—these are the big problems. By comparison, a little spray paint seems not to matter at all.

Except that it does matter. Sociologists and community leaders and law enforcement officials are convinced of it. They find that areas which tolerate graffiti and the defacing of property are areas where the general sense of pride in the community goes down and the crime rate goes up. Cities have actually found that when they keep the walls of a subway freshly painted and free of graffiti, the crime rate on the subway goes down. Communities with run down buildings, trash on the streets, and graffiti on the walls are communities that instill contempt for property and people and self. And that sort of attitude gives rise to all sorts of other evils.

It would be silly to say that graffiti is the root of all evil and that getting rid of it would solve everything. But graffiti reflects attitudes of contempt and despair which *are* at the root of other evils, and it reinforces those attitudes.

Now, what does this have to do with misusing God's name? We're tempted to say, "Oh, it's only words." But words aren't just sounds made by vibrations of our vocal cords. *Only* words? There's a sense in which words are *everything*. Words are the way we express our thoughts and attitudes. Words are the main way we relate to others. When we choose our words carefully, it shows respect for self and for others. But when we're careless about the words we use, it shows that we're careless about what kind of people we are and how we relate to others.

Our use of language is especially significant in relation to God. A mouth that uses the name of God lightly reveals a heart that takes God lightly. A mouth that speaks God's name only with reverence, that speaks of holy things with great care and utmost respect, expresses a heart that honors God. Who we are and what we think of God comes through in how we speak.

Just as graffiti shows contempt not only for property but also for ourselves and others, so misusing God's name shows not only contempt for words but contempt for ourselves and for God. Just as graffiti is an outer symptom of an inner attitude that causes all sorts of other problems, so misusing God's name is an outer symptom of an inner attitude that lies at the root of nearly every problem in the world today.

When we don't take God seriously, can we take anybody or anything else seriously? When God's name isn't sacred, what is sacred? When we don't care about offending God, we aren't much concerned about the feelings of others. When we spray graffiti on God's name and attack his honor, we add to a general atmosphere of contempt for God that breeds every sort of ungodly and antisocial behavior imaginable.

If you think I'm exaggerating the significance of all this, your problem isn't with me. It's with Jesus. He's the one who puts so much emphasis on words, not I. He's the one who declares that what we say reveals who we are and where we stand with God. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 12:34-37.

You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

According to Jesus, words are the evidence of what's in the heart. Words are the evidence that will acquit or condemn us. Words are evidence of salvation or damnation.

When God gave the Ten Commandments, he ordered, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Exodus 20:7). All sorts of problems come from carelessness with words and contempt for God, but this is *the* problem: God himself is insulted, and he "will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

I've met people with terrible language, people who misuse God's name in almost every other sentence. Sometimes, when they find out I'm not only a Christian but a preacher, they are embarrassed and apologetic. They say, "Oh, I didn't realize. I'm sorry if I've offended you." Well, offending me is the least of their problems. They should worry less about what I might think, and more about what God thinks.

The Lord is holy, and his name is holy. And so we must always speak of him with reverence, never with carelessness or contempt. God commands, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." To understand what God prohibits in this commandment, let's point out some common misuses of God's name.

Misuses of God's Name

The first, and perhaps the worst, is blasphemy. Blasphemy is deliberately dragging the Lord's name through the mud, mocking and insulting and making fun of God, speaking of him with hatred and contempt. Some people angrily attack the God portrayed in the Bible, saying they can't believe in a God like that. Some foul-mouthed authors portray Jesus as a contemptible fraud. Movies and comedians sometimes get their laughs by poking fun of Bible stories of truths about the Lord. These are all varieties of blasphemy, deliberate and direct attacks on the name and reputation and honor of God.

Another way of misusing God's name is carelessness. Some people use God's name as an exclamation, a way of spicing up their language. They say "O my God," not as the beginning of a prayer but as a way of showing surprise. They say, "Good Lord,"

not in praise of God's goodness but to express mild astonishment. They use the words "God Almighty" and "Jesus Christ," not to invoke the Master of heaven and earth, but to add some force and emotion to what they're saying. Some use the word "God" every sentence or two for punctuation, almost like a spoken comma or period. This shows a sorry lack of vocabulary and creativity, but it also shows a lack of respect for God. Using God's name casually and carelessly is a violation of God's commandment.

Another violation is cursing. What is cursing? It's talking as though we had control of God's wrath and punishments. If you speak of damnation or tell someone to go to hell, you are calling down a curse that only God himself can carry out. Only God can damn a person to the everlasting sorrow of hell. You have no business calling down such an awful curse on anyone. But maybe you say, "It's only words. I don't mean anything by it." You don't mean anything by it? You think you can speak of hell or damning the way you might say "wow" or "shucks"? To speak these terrible curses, to use words that are properly used only as solemn warnings of God's judgment, shows that you don't take the Judge of the universe seriously. Cursing is a misuse of God's name and a violation of God's commandment.

Still another way of misusing God's name is through euphemisms, using expressions that aren't quite as jarring as the word that is really meant. You may be too polite to "damn" something, so you "darn" it instead. You're squeamish about misusing the name "Jesus," so you say "Gee" or "Jeez" instead. You don't want to say "God" merely as an exclamation, so you say "golly" or "gosh" instead. But using euphemisms can be just a more polite and "respectable" way of misusing God's.

You might be tempted to say, "Give me a break! Lighten up! It's not that serious, is it? It's only words." My point exactly: only words. When you talk as if God and Jesus are only words, you show that God and Jesus aren't a living, personal reality to you. When you talk as though damn and hell are only words, you make light of the dreadful judgment that awaits the enemies of God who will, in fact, be damned to hell.

Only words? "The Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." Only words? "Men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken," says Jesus. "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Misusing God's name isn't just a breakdown in etiquette or a flaw in vocabulary. It is an insult to God. It is a symptom that we are out of touch with who God really is in his holiness and majesty.

I'm sorry I've had to be so blunt and specific about all this. In describing the misuses of God's name, I run the risk of misusing it myself. But I want you see clearly the ways in which some common speech patterns, things to which you might not give a second thought, are violations of God's commandment.

Religious Misuses of God's Name

So far we've looked at some of the more irreligious ways that God's name is misused, but, sad to say, it's also possible to misuse God's name in ways that seem quite religious.

One example is invoking God's name to promote our own agenda. Certain kinds of preachers and church people are fond of saying, "The Lord revealed this to me" or "The Lord told me to do that." A while back, I saw a TV preacher saying, "The Lord revealed to me that he will do great things if only 300 people watching this program will

each call in and give \$300 in the next hour." That may be a good gimmick to raise \$90,000 in less than an hour, but was it a direct revelation from the Lord? Saying "The Lord told me such-and-such" is an effective way of manipulating others and claiming divine authority for one's own ideas, but it's also a shameful misuse of God's name.

God's name can be misused even in the God-talk that we use in church. In Ecclesiastes 5:1-3, the Bible says,

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know what they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

Churchgoer, choose your words carefully. Make sure you listen to God before you start talking about him. Don't say any prayers or sing any songs that you don't really mean. When you start rattling off holy words out of thoughtless habit, you are misusing God's name. When you spout long-winded, wordy prayers, you're not impressing God. You're insulting him. Jesus says, "When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words" (Matthew 6:7). When you pray, tell God what is on your heart and then be quiet. The Lord would rather hear one honest, heartfelt sentence than an hour of empty words.

Ecclesiastes 5 warns us to use God-talk sparingly and not to say anything we don't mean. Then it goes on to warn us not to make any promises we can't keep.

When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest ... "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God (5:4-7).

God's name can be misused in the vows and oaths and promises we make in religious ceremonies. When promises are made at baptism, God takes your promises seriously even if you said them only so you could carry on a family custom. When marriage vows are made in the presence of God, God takes you seriously. If you go back on those promises, you not only betray your spouse, but you also abuse God's name. You may want to say, "My vow was a mistake. And besides, it's only words." But let me say again: Words are everything. Words are the stuff of which relationships are made. When we break our word and dishonor God's name, we destroy our relationship to others and to God. Every word is spoken in God's presence. So say what you mean, and mean what you say.

Taking all of this a step further, there's a sense in which, if you're a Christian, you really shouldn't need any special vows or oaths at all. If you bear the name Christian, everything you say reflects on the name of Christ. Just make sure your words are true and your promises are reliable, and you will do more to honor God's name than any amount of swearing that you're telling the truth. As Jesus puts it, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one (Matthew 5:37). There's no use trying to prove your truthfulness by invoking God's name or

swearing on a stack of Bibles or swearing by anything else. Just be truthful. It is misusing God's name to swear by him in order to shore up your own lack of credibility.

We live in an age that has so little knowledge of the Ten Commandments, so little regard for words, and so little respect for God, that we barely realize when we're misusing God's name, let alone how serious it is. We need to feel once again the full force of that mighty commandment: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

Calling on God's Name

But God doesn't want us to stop there. He doesn't want us to be satisfied just with cleaning up our language a bit. That's essential, of course. God wants us to avoid blasphemy, careless talk, cursing, euphemisms, empty God-talk, babbling prayers, thoughtless vows, and all the rest. But what God really wants is for us to become the kind of people who use his name properly, who call on him for our salvation and praise him joyfully.

However, this isn't something we can do simply by being told to do it. If we're misusing God's name, it shows we've got a problem on the inside. Our words correspond to what is in our hearts. As Jesus puts it, "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." And of itself, God's commandment can't change what is in our hearts. By condemning the misuse of God's name, the commandment points out the symptoms very well, but it doesn't cure the deeper illness: a lack of respect for God and a bad relationship to him. God's law can show us our problem, but it can't solve the problem or change us on the inside.

Something has to happen in our heart. We need God to forgive us and transform us through faith in Jesus Christ and by the inner working of his Holy Spirit. God's law can point out our sin, but only Christ can take away our sin. The law can show us what's wrong with our old heart, but only the Spirit can give us a new heart.

If you've been using bad language and you've begun to realize how wrong it is, don't just make an effort to choose your words a little more carefully from now on. Seek God's help to change the entire way you relate to him. Misusing the Lord's name leads to damnation, but calling on his name in faith leads to salvation. Trust in your heart that Jesus is alive and that he brings you new life. Call on him and ask him to forgive you and make you a new person. Then openly declare him to be your Lord and Master. The Bible says,

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved... the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:9-13).

The name of the Lord isn't just a matter of words. It is the name that saves us, and it is the name that keeps us safe. The Bible says, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10). God revealed himself to Israel as Yahweh (or "Jehovah"), the great I AM, the Lord who is present. He revealed himself clearly and personally as Jesus, that wonderful name which means "Savior." "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"

(Acts 4:12). God revealed the eternal mystery of his divine being and his love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His people are baptized into that glorious triune name, and we receive God's blessing and benediction in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

These ways of referring to God are not just words. They are revealed names of the mighty and gracious Lord of the universe, the names by which his heart of love calls out to our hearts, beckoning us into an intimate relationship with him and into all the riches of his eternal life. So instead of misusing the name of the only one who can save you, call upon his name in repentance and trust, and this great God will be your salvation.

Then you will discover the real point and purpose of your existence: to glorify God and enjoy him forever. As a Christian, seek your deepest joy in exalting God's name. Let God's commandment spur you on to honor the name of the one who created you and saved you. Pray "Hallowed be your name." Sing his praises. Tell others about him. Do everything to the glory of God's name. Look forward eagerly to the day when "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow" (Philippians 2:10).

In Psalm 34, the poet expresses his desire to exalt God's name, and he calls you and me to join him. Let's close with these splendid words:

I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together (Psalm 34:1-3).

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