

“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”

Part Four: “The Third Spiritual Principle ~ “Holy is God’s Name”

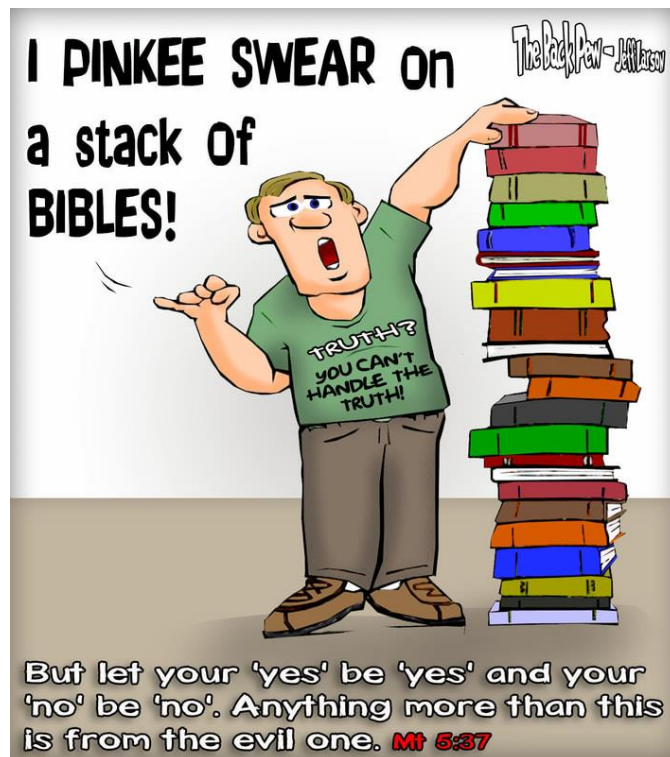
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Exodus 20:7 ~ “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.” (New Revised Standard Version)

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”
(New King James Version)



Around the year 1,500 BCE, God asked his servant Moses to communicate ten spiritual principles to a struggling and weary group of Hebrews, whom God had helped escape from slavery under the Egyptians, and who were camping out at the base of Mt. Sinai on their way to a place referred to as the Promised Land. God began by reminding the people to remember what God had done for them, with this prologue: ²***I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*** God then continued by giving spiritual principle #1: ³***you shall have no other gods before me,*** followed by spiritual principle #2: ⁴***You shall not make for yourself an idol,*** followed by spiritual principle #3: ⁷***You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name*** (NRSV), which in the NKJV is translated as ***“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.*** (Exodus 20:1-7)

Some 1,500 years later, a Jewish holy man named Jesus of Nazareth, who had been raised on what we popularly call the Ten Commandments, stood on a mountainside as had Moses of old and, with his disciples around him, first provided them with a set of spiritual principles known as the Beatitudes, followed by a series of instructions pertaining to various Jewish laws. One of them related to the swearing of oaths, when Jesus said (Matthew 5:33-34,37): ***“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all ... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.***

While there are some like the Quakers who understand this to mean that one should never take an oath in a court of law, it seems to me that Jesus is rather reminding people that, since there is no place we can ever be apart from God in this life or the next, that we should keep our promises no matter what situation we are in. In all circumstances in life we should be trustworthy people of integrity, whom others can count on to keep our word. That is why some call this spiritual principle the “law of respect” (Joan Chittister, Laura Schlessinger).

There are some special public occasions in life, however, when we need something beyond a simple yes or no and intentionally invite God into the picture by making what are known as “oaths” or “vows” (e.g., Deut. 6:13, 10:20). An oath has been defined as a promise in which we call upon someone, usually God, as a witness to the binding nature of the promise. We do this when we put our hand on the Bible in a court of law and promise to tell the truth. We do this when we are sworn in as officials, as elders in the

church, as the minister of a congregation. When we invoke the name of God we are somehow implying that God is the guarantor of our honesty and integrity. Using God's name in this way is truly a huge and risky thing to do!

Let's look at a few occasions in our lives where we take solemn vows within our faith community, which is affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

When we are still a baby or a young child, our parents may decide to bring us to First Christian Church for a special service of dedication. For our purposes, let's call this baby Lisa. Much care has gone into six-month-old Lisa's wardrobe for the day, as she is held in her mother's arms with a beautiful white embroidered dress. The parents, grandparents, relatives, and perhaps godparents walk to the front of the sanctuary. Even though Lisa is crying much of the time, everyone around her has big smiles on their faces. The family stands before the minister and, with the congregation as their witnesses, they make sacred promises, invoking the name of God.

The minister first asks the family: *Do you now present this child and yourself before Almighty God in a sacred act of dedication? Do you pledge before God and these witnesses, to pray for and with this child and to accept your special spiritual responsibility to teach this child to worship regularly and joyfully, sharing with this child the way of Jesus, the love of God, and the importance of serving others?*

And the family answers: *We will, God being our witness.*

The minister then asks the congregation to stand and take the following vow: *As members of the family of God and the church family of First Christian Church, do you promise to assist this family and this child in every way possible: through teaching, guiding, loving, nurturing, and praying for this child?*

And the congregation answers: *As the people of God we promise to teach her, guide her, love her, nurture her, and to pray for her.*

Since names are very important, the minister then asks for the name of the child, and invokes the following ancient scriptural blessing: *Lisa, may the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.* (Numbers 6: 24-26)

Let's flash forward 12 years in time. Lisa's parents kept the solemn vows that they made before God and their family and church family, when they invoked the name of God, promising to raise Lisa up in the Christian faith. They took her to Sunday School and Children Worship and Wonder regularly. They made it a point to enroll her in Vacation Bible School and even took some time off work so that they could volunteer to help at it. The highlight of her summer was her week at Camp Kum-Ba-Yah. They modeled a Christian lifestyle, praying for and with Lisa, seeking God's will for her life, treating others with kindness, finding ways to be of service in their community, tithing a portion of their income to support the church. The congregation took their promise to God seriously as the entire church family nurtured Lisa along in the Christian faith. Therefore, it came as no surprise when Lisa came forward at the age of twelve and wanted to be baptized.

The baptism, as all are in our congregation, was a huge and joyous event. Many of the same people who had gathered some twelve years earlier when Lisa's parents pledged before God to raise her in the Christian faith were there for her baptism. Before Lisa was baptized the minister asked her if, with God as her witness, she believed in Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior and promised to follow him. Lisa replied yes and the minister, before immersing her under the baptismal waters, said: *Because of your confession of faith, I baptize you **IN THE NAME OF the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*** The name of God was again invoked as a solemn promise was made.

Let's flash forward 15 years in Lisa's life. She is now a 27-year-old successful businesswoman. She graduated from Murray High School, and went on to Murray State University, where she majored in accounting, going on to receive an MBA from the University of Kentucky. She works for an international company that has branches all over the world. Her job is a high stress one, but her faith sustains her. A few years earlier she met a wonderful man named Matthew, while they were both grad students at UK. They had lots in common and both were strong Christians, who had been raised in Disciples of Christ congregations.

The day that Matthew proposed was one of the happiest in Lisa's life. As Lisa and Matthew planned their wedding day, they thought back to the other ceremonies in their lives where pledges had been made invoking God's name: their baby dedications and their baptisms. Matthew, as a medical doctor, also had taken a vow to do no harm. They thought carefully about the marriage vows they would make. They knew that they were going to invoke the name of God when they did so, and thought about the third

commandment, where it states: *“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God”* (NRSV) or *“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.”* (NKJV)

During their first pre-marital counseling session with their minister, they discussed the many ways we make wrongful use of God’s name or take it in vain.

We break the third commandment whenever we **curse God** or others using God’s name. We make wrongful use of God’s name when we use it in a swear word or to damn someone. This is the superficial way that popular Christian culture has understood this commandment. Yet we trivialize this commandment if we only understand it as refraining from using certain curse words that have God’s name in it, thereby missing the larger import of this spiritual principle, which has to do with profaning God’s name or using it in vain.

We break the third commandment whenever we **profane God’s name**. Names are extremely important. I know, for example, how upset I was this past week when someone stole my Instagram profile picture and created an Instagram account using my name and began impersonating me. It felt like such a violation! This week I also was struck when, during her presentation on “The Blessings and Challenges of Being Biracial,” Dawn told us how important it was that she kept her maiden name of Thierry, since it signified to the west Illinois community she was raised in that she identified as black, not white.

Yes, names are so important, aren’t they? We name drop to make ourselves feel more important. People tell us “just tell them I sent you!” We somehow imagine that when we know a person’s name we enter into a closer relationship of trust with them. Like when someone asks me the question of “Is it okay if I call you Ruth rather than Rev. or Dr. Ragovin?” By saying yes, please call me Ruth, I am somehow indicating that we have established a closer, more trusting way of relating.

People of all times and places have wanted to choose exactly the right name for their child, intuitively knowing that naming bestows a person’s identity, even influencing a person’s standing and role in life. Names communicate something of the very essence and potential of the person. Indigenous peoples, for example, tried to sense the animal spirit in their children, giving them names like Brave Running Bear, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Flying Eagle. I know that when my daughter was born we initially gave her the name we had chosen months earlier before meeting her in person: Raya Katherine.

Yet over the course of a few days we realized that name did not match her essence. She so resembled in looks and spirit her paternal Jewish grandfather that we officially changed her name on her birth certificate to the Hebrew name Rachel. And she later told us how happy she was that we did so.

Names were understood to be extremely sacred in ancient times. When Moses returned to the base of Mt. Sinai and told the people that ***“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain,”*** he was in the same location where earlier he was tending his father-in-law Jethro’s flock. God suddenly appeared to him in a burning bush, telling him he was sending him off on “mission impossible” to free the Hebrew people from slavery under the Egyptians (Ex 3:10). Moses argued with God and then asked God to reveal God’s name, not just because he wanted to know God’s credentials and because it would be a sign of the authenticity of the message Moses was to deliver but also because he truly believed that knowing God’s name would provide him with the power and protection that he needed to be successful in his mission. When Moses asked for God’s name, ⁴ ***God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. ... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations. My name is Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh: I am who I am. I shall be as I shall be. I am Being. I am Life. No wonder we should be careful about taking the name of the Lord in vain!***

Scripture indicates that the Israelites believed in the power of God’s name. Psalm 20:1, for example, states: ***“May the name of the God of Jacob protect you.”*** Note that it is not “May God protect you,” but “May the name of God” protect you. The Jewish people were so concerned about the sanctity of God’s name that they came to believe that the most sacred name for God, YHWH (*Yahweh*), could only be spoken out loud on Yom Kippur by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies within the Temple. God’s name is not spoken otherwise but is instead pronounced *Adonai* during prayer or when reading from the Torah. Jews, and some Christians, additionally show respect by spelling God incompletely (and in flux) as G-d. In ordinary speech Orthodox Jews show deference for God by referring to God simply as *HaShem*, meaning “the Name”.

God’s name is indeed to be revered and taken seriously by Christians. Jesus taught his followers that they were to begin their prayers with these words: ***“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name”*** (Matt 6:9) While Jesus does employ a familiar relational name for God as “Our Father” in this prayer, he also warns us against using God’s name in vain, trivializing it, when he says that we should hallow it. This means that we should always pray in a manner that takes seriously God’s character as “I am who I am,” one

who is both the source of and Being itself. Additionally, as Christians we pray to God the Father in Jesus' name, lending Jesus' authority to our prayers. The name of Jesus has power. We are baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38). The disciples healed people in the name of Jesus (e.g., Acts 4:10). The Apostle Paul, in one of the earliest hymns of the church, wrote of the name of Jesus that (Philippians 2:9-10):

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted [Jesus]

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

We usually end our prayers with the words "In Jesus' Name. Amen."

We should never lose sight of how hallowed, powerful, and wondrous God's and Jesus' names are. Should we lose sight of that in God, we also run the danger of losing sight of it in ourselves and others. As J. Ellsworth Kalas so rightly says: "I'm quite sure that if you and I were truly to honor God's name, we would honor the very principle of names—our own included! ... When I understand the power that is in the name of God, I will also be more respectful of the names I give to others. How dare I call someone by a derogatory name—nigger, kike, stupid—when God carries a name and ordains the very business of names. ... Names are serious business, because it is by the name of God, and of Jesus Christ, that we enter into the possibilities of our faith." (*The Ten Commandments from the Backside*, pp. 42-43)

We also misuse or take the name of God in vain when we:

Pretend to have a special relationship to God for personal gain like many politicians do in order to get elected. Some use churches as props to appear religious for their constituents.

When we invoke God's name while engaged in evil. We need only think back to the crusaders murdering with the sign of the cross embroidered on their chests and banners, the Holocaust, the Salem Witch hunts, Apartheid, Jim Crow laws, or Christians who misused the Bible to sanction slavery, to exclude groups of people, prevent women who felt called by God from being ordained, deny civil rights to members of the LGBTQ community, and so much more. We should stop saying "God made me do it" or trying to make God responsible for those we hate, humbly remembering how very little we actually know of the mind of God.

Or, as the minister reminded them, we also make wrongful use of or take God's name in vain when we make vows, oaths, and promises we don't really intend to honor. Lisa and Matthew would be making a pledge to each other before God and in the sight of witnesses. They thought deeply about the meaning of the Third Commandment in the days and weeks before their marriage. For them the meaning of the commandment was that if they did not take their marriage vows seriously and just causally used God's name, God would not bless their marriage. And the flip side is just as true: if you keep the promise that you make in God's name, God will bless your relationship. Any time you invoke the name of God you bring God into it. Being married in God's name meant including God in the relationship. They began to see that their marriage was not really going to be a twosome but a threesome, with God being the third partner.

A few weeks later they stood before the minister in Lisa's church, with all the many people present who had been at both of their baby dedications and baptisms, the people who had made a vow before God to raise them up in the Christian faith and who had shed tears of joy at their baptisms. And, with God as their witness, the minister began:

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, and signifying unto us the mystical union which exists between Christ and His Church ... It is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of God.

I require and charge you both, as you stand in the presence of God, before whom the secrets of all hearts are disclosed, that, having duly considered the holy covenant you are about to make, you do now declare before this company your pledge of faith, each to the other.

And then, invoking the name of God, they repeated the ancient vows that their parents, grandparents, and even great grandparents also had taken:

In the name of God, I Matthew, take you Lisa / to be my wedded wife / to have and to hold / from this day forward / for better, for worse / for richer, for poorer / in sickness and in health / to love and to cherish / till death us do part. This is my solemn vow.

And Lisa, **in the name of God**, repeated the same vows to Matthew, taking him to be her husband.

And after having exchanged rings, the minister joined Matthew and Lisa's hands together and, as the angels in heaven rejoiced to witness the marriage vows taken in God's name, said:

Now that Matthew and Lisa have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of rings, I pronounce that they are husband and wife, **in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit**. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder. Amen.

Closing Prayer: God, we confess that we so often make wrongful use of and take your holy name in vain. Usually it is not when engaged in big intentional things like not keeping the public oaths we swear in courts of law, or in religious ceremonies, but rather all those many times we assume that we know your mind and will and impose it on others. Let us always come to you in humility, knowing that we actually only glimpse a tiny part of the infinite whole. Let us honor your name, as we also honor the names of others. We lift up this prayer in the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen.