

TAKE GOD SERIOUSLY

EXODUS 20:1-7

Even though the Atlanta Braves were knocked out of the baseball play-offs by the Houston Astros I've still really enjoyed the league championship series.

What about the Boston Red Sox winning four straight games to topple George Steinbrenner's evil empire – the New York Yankees! And the St. Louis Cardinals have also been spectacular... October is a great time for baseball...

And in light of baseball's post season I brought with me this morning a list entitled, "*Baseball's Ten Commandments*". Apparently, it was composed by a young boy – probably a Little Leaguer... Here's baseball's top ten...

1. Honor thy umpire.
2. Thou shall not use thy coach's name in vain.
3. Thou shall not commit errors.
4. Keep thy uniform holey.
5. Thou shall not argue with the umpire's call.
6. Thou shall not throw thy equipment in anger.
7. Thou shall never get caught stealing.
8. Thou shall not drop easy fly balls.
9. Thou shall not miss cut-offs.
10. Thou shall never take a third strike.

This fall we're studying our way through the Ten Commandments. Obviously, not "*Baseball's Ten Commandments*" – but a much more important list – the first 17 verses of Exodus 20 list for us God's Top Ten Commandments...

God has provided us ten non-negotiables.

Guys, sometimes life can be a bear. It can become overwhelming. You grab the tiger by the tail and you can't let go. I've heard it put, "*Life is like wrestling a gorilla. You don't rest when you get tired.*"

You rest when the gorilla gets tired.”

Life can get confusing, and exhausting, and bewildering, and taxing.

But God is the author of life – and though sin has complicated what He intended – nevertheless, God still knows how life can best be navigated.

And God understands there are issues in life that need to be decided on in advance... convictions we should settled in our minds and hearts beforehand.

This is what the Ten Commandments are all about.

Exodus 20 provides us ten anchors to tie on to when the storms rage and temptation barrels down upon us. These ten footings give our lives stability.

The Ten Commandments are like the fixed point on the compass.

When life gets dark and confusing, and we can't see around the bend – these ten foundational principles guide us, and protect us, and keep us on track.

Already, we've studied the first two commandments – *only one God* and *right worship*. This morning we want to look at the third commandment. Here's how you can sum it up, *take God seriously*. Let's begin in verse 1 and read through verse 7.

And God spoke all these words, saying: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before Me.”

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to

thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

And the third commandment, which we'll look at today...

Verse 7, **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.**

This past week I found a list of funny, silly, comical names...

What do you name a girl who's a tomboy, and plays in the dirt?

Anita Bath.

What's the perfect name for a southern gourmet cook? Barbie

Cue.

Here's a good name for a Middle East peace negotiator... Barry D.

Hatchett.

Did you hear about the advertising executive – his name was Bill

Board.

Or the aspiring singer named, Carrie Oakey.

Or the home decorator – her name was Chanda Lear.

Here's a good name for a funeral director... Doug Graves.

And I'm sure every one has heard of the Star Wars fanatic... Jed I.

Knight.

What about the comedian named... Joe King.

This summer my wife wants me to get to know a guy named –

Lon Moore.

I'd like to meet the hotel owner... Mary Ott.

Or the woman who does all the charity work... Marsha Dimes.

And did you hear about the woman who kept jaywalking... Misty

Meanor.

Here's a good name for a librarian... Paige Turner.

I think the guy who invented the pinball machine was named, Rick

O'Shea.

And wouldn't it be great to read a classic novel by Warren Piece.

Finally, the lady who became a Christian – her name was Ima B.

Leever.

Hey, names can be comical. People can have a lot of fun with their names.

There's a Texas couple who recently named their son "*Espen*." They spell it "*ESPN*". How can you do that to a child? Their last name is "Sportscenter"... I'm just kidding about the last name - but it's my understanding that there are, at least, three different Americans who possess the name, "*ESPN*".

I also heard of a Michigan couple who wanted to give their son his father's name. He would be a junior. But rather than put "Jr." or "II" at the end of his name they put "2.0". Their son is now version 2.0 - Billy 2.0. How can you do that to a kid?

Trust me, a man named "*Sandy*" learns quickly not to take his name too seriously. Most of us can laugh, joke, and play around about our names.

It reminds me of the Indian Chief who got tired of his name. It was too long. He petitioned the court for a change. The Judge asked, "*What's your name now?*" He said, "*Chief Screeching Train Whistle*" "*And to what name do you want to shorten it?*" The Chief folded his arms, stuck out his chest, and said proudly, "*Toots*".

From "*Chief Screeching Train Whistle*" to "*Toots*"... that's a clever alteration.

But understand, God has not petitioned the court for an alteration to His name.

Use any of God's precious names flippantly, or disrespectfully, or hypocritically and you not only insult God, you degrade God's very nature and character.

The third commandment tells us not to "**take the name of the LORD your God in vain**". The expression "**in vain**" means "*emptiness or nothingness*" – which says we should never do anything that would empty God's name of meaning, or strip it of significance. Don't *trivialize*, or *marginalize*, or *minimize* the name of God.

Put in the positive the third commandment means we should take God seriously. We should honor His name, and treat Him with reverence.

Understand, your name was given to you by the people in authority over you – your parents. The act of naming carries with it a show of authority. Adam had the task of naming all the animals since God gave mankind dominion over nature.

Adam named his furry friends. And he also named his wife, Eve, since God had called him to be head over the woman. Adam named almost everything, but God.

It was God who named Adam, not Adam who named God. Hey, *God named Himself*, and in so doing, claimed to be the ultimate authority... And this is why God commands us to honor, and respect, and reverence His name.

The name of God is a show of His authority, and a reflection of His nature.

God's *handle* also revealed God's *holiness*. His *name* reveals His *nature*.

In Hebrew culture a name is far more than a convenient way to address another person. In a sense, you became your name, and your name becomes you. A person's name and nature become intertwined. An individual's name becomes a synonym for their reputation, and character, and total person.

This is why in Bible times when a dramatic change occurred in a person's life they'd often adopted a new name. When God affirmed His promise of a son to Abram, God changed his name to Abraham, or "father of many nations."

After God blessed Jacob, his name became "Israel", or "prince of God".

When Levi, the tax collector, left his table and became a follower of Jesus his name was changed to Matthew - which means "gift from God".

There is a literary device known as *synecdoche*. It's when you use a part to stand for the whole. Here's a synecdoche... Let's say I go home, and tell Kathy, "I saw fifty new faces at church this morning." All I said I saw were faces, but we all understand I meant fifty whole people. The names of God were a synecdoche.

They were more than just names. The names of God were reflections and representations of God's flawless, and indescribable, and impeccable holiness.

It's hard for us to appreciate just how highly the Jews revered God's name.

In the Old Testament there were three primary names for God, each revealing a different dimension of His character. The first name was "*Elohim*". This spoke of God's power to create. He is the Almighty. Elohim emphasizes His strength.

Second, was the word "*Adonai*" which means "Lord" or "boss" or "Master".

And third was the name, "*Yahweh*", or the Anglizied equivalent, "*Jehovah*". In your Bible everywhere the word "*LORD*" appears in capitals, it's a translation of the Hebrew word, "*Yahweh*". This was God's covenant name with his people.

This was the name God gave to Israel when she became his wife. It spoke of His mercy - His patience - His willingness to keep His promises. God is Elohim, *our maker*, and Adonai, *our master* – and also Yahweh, *our merciful Mediator*.

The name "*Yahweh*" was the name God gave to Moses on the same mountain where he got the Ten Commandments. At the burning bush, God told Moses to go to Egypt, but Moses wanted to know, "*Who will I tell them sent me?*"

God replied, "*Tell them, I am that I am, has sent you.*"

The phrase "*I am*" is the present tense form of the verb "*to be*." It speaks of existence, of being, of reality. In taking this name God

claimed to be the ultimate reality, the only truly self-existent One in the universe. God has need of nada. He is self-sustaining, and independent. He had no beginning, and He has no end.

The Bible calls Him the God who was, who is, and who is to come.

None us can say that. No matter how wealthy or powerful you are you remain dependant on God for the air you breathe and your next breath. Far from being the ultimate reality - your life is a vapor - a puff of smoke on a cold winter morning.

It reminds me of the scientist who walked up to God and boasted, "God, we can clone people now, and do all kinds of technological wonders. We really don't need you anymore." God said, "Well, before you jump the gun, let's have a contest. Let's make a man." The scientist was eager, "Great, no problem."

God added, "Let's make him like the first man - from the dust of the ground." The scientist was still confident, "Fine!" But as the scientist reached to gather up a handful of dirt, God stopped him... "Wo, wait a minute. Get your own dirt."

We all need God. God is the "great I am", and we are the "great I ain'ts".

The names *Elohim* and *Adonai* were names for God that often had alternative meanings. But the word "Yahweh" was used exclusively as a name for God.

Thus, "Yahweh" was considered by the Hebrews to be the most holy and sacred of all God's names. This is the thrust of the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the LORD (or Yahweh) your God in vain."

Verse 7 goes on to stress the seriousness of this command, "For the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain." Punishment is promised.

In Leviticus 24 we see a severe punishment carried out. A man was stoned for profaning God's sacred name. To trifle with the name could be deadly. I'd hope the Hebrews who witnessed that

stoning took God seriously forever after.

For centuries God's name was so revered by the Jews they were afraid to even speak it. When they read Scripture, and came to "*Yahweh*", they'd bow their heads and read simply... "*the Name.*" They didn't want to be guilty of using it in vain.

In later years they refused to even write it. They wrote only the consonants "YHWH." This YHWH is referred to by Bible scholars as the "*tetragrammaton*".

What's sad though is over the years of writing only the consonants the Jews today no longer know what vowels actually belong in the word. The term "*Yahweh*" is the tetragrammation - with the vowels for the name *Adonai* inserted. Because of their desire to keep the third commandment the Jews lost the *name of God*.

"*Yahweh*" is as close as we can come.

There is though another name for God that's mentioned in the New Testament. This is the holiest and most precious of all God's names... it's the name, "*Jesus*".

In Acts 4:12 Peter comments about the name Jesus, "**Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.**" Or as the hymn writer puts it, "**There is a name I love to hear, I love to sing its worth; it sounds like music in my ear, the sweetest name on earth.**"

The name "*Jesus*" means "*Yahweh is salvation*". Here is a name for God that couples *God's holiness* with *man's hope*. God is *Yahweh* – the great "*I am*" – the self-existent One, but *Yahweh is salvation*. He works to achieve our forgiveness and offers it to us freely. Romans 10:13 says, "**Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.**" And the Lord he speaks of is the Lord Jesus Christ.

For those of us who know God there is no other name for Him more powerful, or precious, or encouraging, or stimulating, or captivating than the name, Jesus.

And what held true in the Old Testament for the name “*Yahweh*” still applies to the name, “*Jesus*” – *but even to a greater degree*. The person in Leviticus 24 who blasphemed the name *Yahweh* died a physical death at the hands of executioners.

But the person who blasphemes the name of Jesus will die – not just a physical death, but spiritually and eternally. Resist His name, and the punishment is forever.

Guys, all this talk of God’s name combines to say to us... *take God seriously*.

And you do that by watching the words and expletives that exit your mouth - particularly the words that you speak about God, and the name of God.

Words are powerful things.

Words shape our world, and alter our perceptions, and build up or tear down our relationships. In fact, God has chosen to communicate to us through words.

James 3:3 tells us, “Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things.”

In a sense a tongue is nothing but “a two ounce slab of mucous membrane”, but that definition masks the fact that this limp, wagging, slither of flesh can dominate and determine the direction of families, communities, and nations.

Reverence and *irreverence* are cultures created by the use of words – words about God and words towards God. *Praise, and honor, and truth* work to establish a culture of reverence. Mockery, and blasphemy, and unbelief create irreverence.

And sad to say, our nation today, is without a doubt, *a culture of irreverence*.

If ever there was a message for modern ears it's the third commandment.

Our world needs to take God seriously - and the way to initiate that attitude is to make sure we never take the name of the Lord in vain. For the sake of your soul, your family, your nation, and your future *reverence* needs to be a non-negotiable.

I'm not saying we should always act serious – or we should always take life seriously – *that'll give you an ulcer*. And we certainly shouldn't take ourselves so seriously. But here is the non-negotiable God wants us to embrace in advance – here is where there should be no compromise – *always take God seriously*.

And this is where our culture errs. *Though God gets mentioned almost everywhere – nowhere is He taken seriously*. He gets trivialized as “*the man upstairs*” - or He's portrayed as a cigar smoking old man who looks like George Burns - or He's blasphemously accused of carrying on sexual relations with Mary Magdalene – or He's reduced to the mystical force responsible for the big bang.

Everybody wants to talk about God, but never as He really is – as He has revealed Himself in the pages of Scripture, and in the history of His people.

This wicked world and the spirit of this age, the devil, work together to *trivialize God's presence – marginalize God's authority – and minimize God's influence*.

Here is the devil's goal in a nutshell – **He wants to keep God in our thoughts, but make Him nothing more than an afterthought**. Not the God before whom every knee will bow – the God who will stand in judgment over all men. Rather than have us fear, and reverence, and worship God, Satan wants to neutralize our thoughts of God, by emptying our understanding and appreciation of His name.

This is why the third commandment is so critical for our modern world.

Let me suggest there are three ways that you and I could become guilty of taking the name of God in vain – **profanity**, **frivolity**, and **hypocrisy**.

And with the time I have left I want to look at each of these potential pitfalls.

The first way to take the Lord's name in vain is through **profanity**. In 1939 Hollywood released the film, "*Gone with the Wind*", and the culture was shocked. Moviegoers everywhere gasped at the end of the movie when Clark Cable said those infamous words, "**Frankly my dear, I don't give a rip.**"

Of course, he didn't say "rip" – he used the D-word. But it was the first time a profanity had ever been heard on the silver screen. Today there's a sports show that carries the D-word in the title of the show. *That's how far we've sunk...*

Today, profanity and blasphemies are everywhere. Television, movies, books, the internet – we're bombarded. If you were a visitor on this planet you'd think we were ignorant and uneducated, and couldn't come up with any creative language.

Often we refer to profanity as an *expletive*. Webster defines "*expletive*" as "**a syllable, word, or phrase inserted to fill a vacancy in a sentence without adding to the sense.**" An expletive is just a filler. When our mind goes blank, and we sense an awkwardness in conversation, rather than fill it with a meaningful expression our heart erupts with the evil it contains, and out pops dirty, needless verbiage.

Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, "**The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked...**" Jesus added, "**out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks**"

Here's what happens... Every human being has sinful attitudes and habits brewing inside. There's rebellion in us all - and when situations don't go our way we get angry and frustrated – *this is not how life was meant to be*. But rather than admit our sin, and the sin

of Adam, and call out to God for help - it seems that the whole world gets angry at God, and fills in the vacancies by lashing out at Him.

Why is it that nobody slams a hammer down on their finger, and screams, “**Oh Bhudda**”, or “**Prophet Muhammed**” - it’s always “*Jesus Christ*”, or “*Oh my God*” - or they want God to dam someone. Even Christians will use the expletive “*Gosh*”, which is short for “*God*” - or “*Jeez*” which is a cut down form of “*Jesus*” – or they’ll scream “*Gosh Darn*”, that’s the abridged version of something much worse.

Why do we need any expletives? Why cram any filler into the vacancies in our speech? Why not express our thoughts with words that glorify God?

Recently, I’ve begun using the expression, “*O my*”. When something goes wrong I say, “*O my*”. Hey, usually what I’m upset about was cause by me anyway. It’s my mess. “*O my*” reminds me to take responsibility for my part in the problem.

Obviously, we break the third commandment when we couple the Lord’s name with an offensive or unflattering expletive - or use His sacred name itself to vent our anger. How dare us take the precious, saving name of Jesus Christ and run it through the mud. Break the third commandment and Satan squeals with glee.

Yet, I know people who go around stringing together the words “*God*” and “*dam*”, without even thinking about what they’re saying. You’ll hear them make excuses, “**Well I don’t even think about it.**” And perhaps, that’s their greater crime – they disgrace God, without even giving it a single thought!

They certainly don’t consider what they’re really saying - why would anyone want to dam someone in the first place? The word “*dam*” is short for *damnation*. Do you really want to send someone to hellfire? Even if you’re are so cold and callous that you would, understand God would never dam a human being!

Don't ask God to dam someone. God doesn't bring damnation on anyone. The only person who'll send you to hell is yourself – if you reject God's gift of salvation.

God loves us. Jesus bore our sin and died in our place. He paid our penalty. God wants to save us, not dam us! Romans 8:34 asks us a question, "Who is he who condemns? (It's not Jesus) It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us."

Rob Schenck tells of how he confronted two men on an airplane who were breaking the third commandment. He writes, "After a long speaking itinerary, I boarded a late-night flight to return home. I was tired and looking for some rest.

Sitting behind me in the airplane were two salesmen whose conversation was peppered with profanity. I finally had it when they began running the Lord's name into the gutter. I raised myself up from my seat and turned so that I was looking down on them from my perch. Then I asked, "Are either of you pastors?"

The one in the aisle seat raised his eyebrows and said, "What the ___ would ever make you think that?" Rob answered him, "Well, I am a pastor, and I'm amazed at your communication skills. You just said God, damn, hell, and Jesus Christ in one sentence. I can't get all of that into a whole sermon!"

They both blushed, and I didn't hear another word the remainder of the flight."

Look careful at verse 7. Notice it doesn't say, "You shall not speak the name of the LORD your God in vain." It says, "you shall not take..." you shall not take it...

Don't put up with it. When you hear someone dragging the name of your Lord and Savior through the mud don't just take it... Voice a complaint - say something.

When I try to watch a movie with some redeeming value – or that teaches a good moral lesson – *yet is sprinkled with a few*

profanities - my family gets upset with me. Every time I hear the word “Jesus” or “God” spoken disrespectfully I can’t just ignore it – I have to voice my disapproval. Sometimes I’ll shut down the movie.

Don’t just take it! I coached with a fellow once who took the Lord’s name in vain whenever someone made an error. I would always tell him, “**Look, don’t blame that error on Jesus. What the young man probably needs is some better coaching.**”

If someone approached you and coupled your wife’s name with a foul word you wouldn’t just ignore it and move on? No way, not if you really love your wife. And likewise if we really love Jesus we won’t just take it – we’ll speak up for Jesus.

A second way to break the third commandment is **frivolity**.

We need to take God seriously - therefore treating God’s name in a light and careless manner – speaking it flippantly or too casually is affront to who God is!

Referring to God as “*the man upstairs*” or “*the big guy in the sky*”... does that really do the King of Creation justice? Is that really reflective of His holiness?

If suddenly, the clouds parted, and the heavens peeled back, and there on His throne sat Almighty God – just as described in Revelation 4. A rainbow surrounds the throne. Lightning and thunder and voices emanate from the throne. Before the throne is a crystal sea. And four living creatures are hovering above the throne saying, “**Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.**”

And here you are thrust into that scene... trust me you’re not going to walk up to God, slap Him on the back, and say, “**Whatz up**” You’re going to hit the deck so hard you’ll bust your knees... You’re going to fall face down and worship.

Everywhere you turn these days you’ll find frivolous uses of God’s name.

Stephen Carter writes, “There is probably no country in the Western world where people use God’s name quite as much, or quite as publicly, or for quite as many purposes, as we Americans do...” Athletes thank God after hitting a homer, or scoring a touchdown. Movie stars will do a lewd, filthy film, and when they walk on stage to accept their Oscar, they’ll thank God. Rarely do you hear a political speech – from either party - that doesn’t close, “And may God bless America.”

You would think with all the God-talk that exists there would be more genuine love for God, or fellowship with God, or obedience to God. But *talking about God* is not the same as *walking with God*. *Referencing God* isn’t *reverencing God*.

You’ll find violations of the third commandment on the campaign stump, the baseball field, in the entertainment world, but you’ll also find it in the church.

Philip Ryken observes, “There seems to be so little reverence and awe, so little trembling before God’s majesty. Instead, we take God lightly.”

This happens when we start throwing around religious cliques. People shout “*Praise the Lord*”, “*Hallelujah*”, “*Bless God*” – without really wanting to truly praise God – with no idea of what the word *hallelujah* actually means – and with no real concern at all, whether God is truly blessed or pleased by what’s happened.

We probably take God’s name in vain during our worship more than at any other time. With our mouths we verbalize these profound and glorious concepts of God, but with our minds we’re already previewing the World Series action, or we’re planning our menu for lunch, or we’re plotting out the coming week’s activities.

We need to take God seriously - both in the workplace and in our worship.

The third and final way to break the third commandment is by **hypocrisy**.

In Luke 6:46 Jesus says, “Why do you call Me “Lord, Lord,” and do not do the things which I say?” There are plenty of people who aren’t above using the name of Jesus to feign some connection to Him in order to fulfill an ulterior motive.

Dishonest people come to church all the time asking for a handout - talking about how much they love God – all the while trying to pick the church’s pocket.

There are crooked businessmen, and politicians, and even pastors who will lay it own thick. They can sound so spiritual and godly, *and then steal you blind.*

There use to be a popular song entitled, “Games People Play”. One of the lines sums it up: “In the name of the Lord, they sock it to you, games people play.”

Guys, we can take the Lord’s name in vain when we talk about how much we love God, and want to serve God – not because we genuinely do - but because there’s someone we want to impress with our supposed piety and spirituality.

Have you ever talked about God – tossed out spiritual jargon – even quoted a Bible verse - because the buyer you were dealing with was a Christian, and you thought if he saw you as a committed Christian he might give you the bid?

What about the politician who stands up and talks about his faith in God, and his commitment to God, and his adherence to Christianity – knowing full well he’ll cast his vote to keep abortion legal, and to grant homosexuals the status of marriage? I believe that politician is breaking the third commandment. It’s hypocrisy. He’s espousing a false allegiance to God... just to win votes.

In Acts 19 seven Jewish exorcists watch Paul cast our demons – and they hear him command the demons to come out in the name of Jesus. When they hear him invoke Jesus’ name they figure, “That’s it! The secret spell is *the name of Jesus.*”

So they run out and find a demon possessed man, and try out

their new incantation. “In the name of Jeeesssus!” And they pop the guy on the head.

Well, that’s when the demon fired back, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” The man with the demon jump on the sons of Sceva and beat the living daylights out of them - like the Bulldogs will do to the Gators next week!

These sons of Sceva used the name of Jesus in vain. They invoked Jesus’ name without a relationship with Jesus... and suffered dire consequences.

It’s scary to think that a person can come to church on Sunday and sing God’s praises - then on Monday stump his toe, or miss a sale, or get stuck in traffic and be guilty of taking that same precious name of God in vain. Beware of hypocrisy.

Hey, *prayer without practice - creeds without commitment – statements of faith without steps of faith* – these are all hypocritical uses of God’s glorious name.

There are people who go to church every Sunday, and never say a vulgar word, who’ll be shocked to realize one day that they’ve been taking the Lord’s precious name in vain for years. G. Campbell Morgan once wrote, “The blasphemies of the Church are infinitely worse than the blasphemies of the street...”

Guys, here is a non-negotiable. Here’s an issue we need to settle in advance. Are we willing to say, “*As for me and my house, we’re going to take God seriously!*”

Hey, watch how you use God’s name... Be careful that your words to God and your attitude about God *are respectful not profane – are sincere not frivolous – are honest not hypocritical.* Guys, I believe our country needs to recreate a culture of reverence – and I want it to begin in my life and in my family.