

Sunday, September 27, 2009 Exodus 20:7 & 24

What's in a name? Companies spend millions of dollars in advertising – to get their name out. What's in a name? Your parents were concerned that you set a good example among your neighborhood friends lest your family get a bad name. What's in a name? You know how you feel when people use your name to gossip or make fun of you. Your name is your reputation. With a good name you lift up your head with confidence. A bad name can make life miserable.

What's in God's name? His name refers certainly to His personal names and titles, like God, Lord, Father, Jesus, Christ, or Holy Spirit. His name is also His reputation, and how has He made His reputation known? He has revealed Himself through His holy Word. Just as you are happy when someone you love uses your name to call you up for a chat, and you would be angry if someone misused your name and trashed your reputation, how do you think God feels about His name? Let's consider "What's in a name?" as we look at the Second Commandment today as we remember Jesus has said, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine!" The commandment reads, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name."

Imagine if you were in a car accident on a dark lonely country road, and your cell phone was lying on the seat next to you. You picked it up, but you had injured your head and couldn't even remember to call 911! What panic and fear would grip you! You could die before anyone found you. In a sense the whole human race is in an accident, a terrible, eternally deadly accident. Actually, it wasn't an accident. Adam and Eve deliberately destroyed the life God intended for the human race. They disobeyed their Creator's loving command by giving in to Satan's sin against the Second Commandment. He misused God's name by asking, "Did God really say?" and then by promising, "You can be like God if you just disobey Him!" We're born in that sin. We struggle against it. But we cannot overcome it. So we're doomed to death and eternal destruction – unless there is a name we know, Someone we can call on to save and help us! "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved!" (Romans 10:13). God revealed His name to us to bless and save us!

Think of the wonderful truths He has given us in His holy Word, the way by which we know His saving name. Jesus, the Word made flesh, revealed God's grace and truth to our fallen race. He said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life." He, the Son of God, never once brought disgrace to His Father's name, for He never once sinned. Yet the human race rejected Him, condemned Him, and crucified Him. Because of our sin, He who knew no sin became sin for us. Yes, Christ died for you. He took upon Himself your sin, death, and hell, and bore the burden of it all. But nothing could hold Him down. He was too strong. He rose from beneath it all and overcame it so that you are free from it too by believing in Jesus! In that dreadful moment when you, all alone, will be going through the valley of death, you'll call no medical personnel, you'll call no family member or friend, you'll cry out in your deepest desire, "Jesus, Lord, have mercy!" And he will be there to guide you to heaven. When you realize God in heaven has revealed His name to bless and save you, you surely don't to misuse it, do you?

But our world surely does, and so does our sinful nature, that Old Adam still rebels against God within us. Cursing, asking God to damn someone or something, useless swearing, using God's name to try to convince someone you are telling the truth when it is not necessary; false swearing – taking an oath under the authority of one of God's representatives – and then lying – all these are sinful abuses of God's holy, saving name. Don't, not even for fun, have anything to do with astrology, palm reading, crystal gazing, ouija boards, card or tea leaf readings – for these are all used by the devil to bring people under His power and lead them away from trusting the saving name of Jesus. The spirits of the departed cannot return to communicate with the living – any form of spiritism, or consulting a medium is an abomination in the Lord's sight and misuses His saving name. But perhaps the greatest abuse of God's name

occurs when false preachers rise up and offer their lying teachings as though it were God's Word. God will not tolerate His name used as a cover-up for a lie! And though you and I might breath a sigh of relief thinking, "I would never do any of these things," perhaps the temptation for us who know the meaning of God's name is not profanity, but lip service – just mouthing God's name in prayer and worship and not meaning it. Or perhaps indifference is our greatest temptation if we fail to use God's Word and let it lie powerless when we could be reading it, believing it as our only hope, guiding our family and friends in it, and encouraging others with it.

There's an old picture of a sailor, with his fists tightly clenched, sizzling mad. At his feet lay an American flag, torn to shreds. "Who did that?" reads the caption of the picture. In a corner under a seat cowers a little puppy, the obvious perpetrator of the abuse of the American flag. What is the message of that picture? Why should the sailor get so mad? It was only a piece of red, white, and blue cloth that was torn. That flag stands for the United States of America, your homeland. Many have died in battle so that flag can still fly over the land of the free and the home of the brave. Insult that flag, and you insult our country. In the same way, someone might wonder, "What's wrong about misusing God's name? It's only a little name? Mistreat His name, and you insult God Himself!

So we bow our heads to confess, "Lord, have mercy on me – for every time I have cursed or sworn needlessly; for every time I trusted someone other than you, for every time I simply mouthed your name in worship or prayer, for every time I failed to hear or apply your name through by failing to take to heart the message of your holy Bible."

Did you mean that prayer? Then take heart, dear child of God. Your sins are forgiven! Christ has covered you with His cloak of holiness. He has died and risen to take away all the guilt of your sin. God loves you, forgives you daily, and by your God-given faith in Jesus Christ, He will take you to heaven!

Now, how shall we who are holy in God's sight through Christ use His holy name? Pray, for He loves to hear you call on His name, pouring out your sins, your desires, your needs and requests for yourself and others! Praise – With your whole inner being, praise His holy name! When Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople, was persecuted in his old age, banished from his country, and thrown into poverty and hunger, his dying words were: "God be praised for everything!" Thank God, for He has given you eternal life. He has given you the gospel in Word and Sacrament to keep you in faith. He will work out all, all for your good, for He loves you with an everlasting love! Confess His name! We do that by identifying ourselves with Him by joining His Church, by worshiping Him, and by declaring His saving Word to others. Though others may ridicule, even persecute us for this, we have our Savior's promise that when we confess His name before others, He will confess our name before His Father in heaven. Jesus – the name that means Savior! How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in the believer's ear! Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given to men, by which we must be saved. When the Lord returns in glory, at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. Thank God we bow before His name now in child-like faith!

If you find yourself using expressions like "For Christ's sake" or "for Jesus' sake" let it not be thoughtlessly, but to explain to others that it is for Christ's sake, for Jesus' sake alone we receive pardon for all sin and the gift of eternal life. For His sake alone God will take us to heaven. What greater way to honor God's name than to use it, not to damn someone or something, but for the salvation of souls; not for wishing people were damned to hell, but for showing them Jesus, the One who gives eternal life! Amen.