



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 18.4.3.2 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Second Commandment

This is the complete wording of the Second Commandment as it is recorded in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy:

- **“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 20:7).
- **“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”** (Deuteronomy 5:11).

The name of the LORD (JAHVEH or JEHOVAH) includes more than this one specific name or any of the many other names God gives Himself in the Bible, such as God, Redeemer, Savior, Jesus, Christ, Holy Spirit, Father, Immanuel, Creator, and so forth. The name of God includes everything He has revealed about Himself in the entire Bible. In Jesus’ prayer to His Father He used “name” and “words” interchangeably. First, He says to His Father: **“I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me”** (John 17:6). A bit later He says: **“I have given to them the words which You have given Me”** (John 17:8). God’s name is in His words. As we are to honor the name of our God, we are also to honor and cherish all the words that our God has given us. We are to use His name and His words for good purposes, but not for an evil purpose. That would be taking God’s name in vain.

The Lutheran *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 352) gives us this English translation of the Second Commandment and Luther’s explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

The Second Commandment

You are not to misuse the name of your God.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God’s name, but instead use that very name in every need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

We know that this Second Commandment is part of God’s moral law and is still God’s will for us today, because it is repeated in the New Testament. James, the brother of our Lord Jesus, wrote: **“Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?”** (James 2:6-7). James also wrote: **“No man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be”** (James 3:8-10). Here is another word from James: **“Above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’ lest you fall into judgment”** (James 5:12).

James also teaches us the right way to use the name of God: **“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the**

prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:13-16).

The apostle Paul also warned against misuse of the name of God. He told the Galatians: **"Those who practice such things (including "sorcery" and "heresies") will not inherit the kingdom of God"** (Galatians 5:20-21). He wrote to the Ephesians: **"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers"** (Ephesians 4:29).

Notice that Luther first speaks of the misuse of God's name by cursing, swearing, sorcery, and lying and deceiving by God's name. Then he refers to the right use of God's name: calling on His name in time of trouble, praying to Him, praising Him, and giving Him thanks.

Cursing by God's name includes cursing God Himself and cursing others in God's name, that is, calling on God to harm them in some way, as when one person says to another person: "God damn you", or: "Go to hell". The Pharaoh of Egypt cursed God when he replied to the request Moses made in God's name to let His Israelites slaves go away to worship their God: **"Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice?"** (Exodus 5:2). Cursing God in this way is called blasphemy.

God's name is misused often in human conversation when the name of God is called on to send evil on someone. But we ought to be using our tongues to bless other people, that is, calling on God to do good to others, and not to curse them (James 3:8-10). It is so easy for us to use our tongues to hurt other people rather than to edify them or build them up in their faith. But it is not a misuse of God's name when we repeat God's curses on unbelievers and false teachers when it is appropriate to do so, as Paul himself did: **"If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed"** (1 Corinthians 16:22). **"Even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed"** (Galatians 1:8).

God's name is misused by swearing an oath regarding a lie or a false promise or swearing an oath in uncertain matters, or needless swearing an oath. When one swears by God's name in court, one should speak only the truth. If one lies under oath, that is called perjury and is contrary to God's will. Swearing means asking God to witness our truth and punish our lie. There are times when it is proper to swear and take a solemn oath in God's name to tell the truth. Jesus swore before the Jewish court that He was the Messiah and the Son of God. When **"the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, 'Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?', Jesus said, 'I am'"** (Mark 14:61-62). Matthew informs us that on this occasion the high priest said to Jesus: **"I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!"** (Matthew 26:63). Since Jesus Himself swore to tell the truth and Paul and others have also sworn on solemn occasions, we cannot say that all swearing is sinful. But when Peter **"began to curse and swear"** that he did not even know who Jesus was, he was shamefully denying his Lord (Matthew 26:74).

It surely should not be necessary for Christians to swear in God's name in ordinary conversation. As James said, we should have such a reputation for truth and honesty that when we say "Yes" or "No", we do not have to add God's name so that people will believe what we say. Jesus warned us against needless swearing when He said: **"Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one"** (Matthew 5:37).

An awful example of swearing in uncertain matters is provided by King Herod when he swore to give the daughter of Herodias whatever she wanted, up to the half of his kingdom. He did not know what she was going to ask for. When she asked for the head of John the Baptist, Herod regretted his oath. But he felt he had to keep it, and thus added another murder to his list of crimes. The account is recorded in Mark 6:21-28.

In the United States it is common for people to consider any kind of crude, vulgar, or obscene language to be cursing or swearing, also called "cussing". But cursing and swearing in the context of the Second

Commandment refer to the use and misuse of the name of God. It is important that when we use the name of God or the name of Jesus, we ask ourselves whether we are using that name for prayer, praise, or giving thanks, or if we are using it needlessly or thoughtlessly, or even to harm someone else. God Himself can hear every word we say, and He knows why we are saying what we say.

Crude language or obscenities may not be the best language to use, but it is not as bad as misusing God's holy name. In America, television and movies frequently use the name of God in vain, even though certain words that are considered obscene are not used so frequently. But in all our words we should aim to help people and not hurt them. **"Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one"** (Colossians 4:6). Just like bits in horses' mouths and rudders in ships, **"even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity"** (James 3:5-6).

God's name or Word is also misused when it is used in connection with sorcery or magic, or in other superstitious ways that have no basis in God's Word. God's Word condemns such practices as astrology, fortune telling, contacting the dead, and the use of magic charms. The Christians in Ephesus burned their books of black magic after they learned the real power and worth of Jesus' name. See Acts 19:13-19.

It is dangerous for us to experiment with the occult – the secret arts of witches, wizards or evil spirits. Our faith should be placed in the true God, who does His marvelous work through the means He has chosen, namely, His Word and His sacraments. We should not want to give up our faith in a God we can trust for false beliefs encouraged by the devil and his angels (i.e., demons or evil spirits). The apostle Paul has warned us that **"the coming of the lawless one (Antichrist) is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders"** (2 Thessalonians 2:9).

The worst misuse of God's name and Word occurs when teachers and preachers use God's name and claim to be speaking for God and then teach things that are contrary or beyond God's Word. What the apostle John once wrote has certainly been proved true in our time: **"Many false prophets have gone out into the world"** (1 John 4:1). This has been true in every age and will continue to be true until the last day. Some of these false teachers have simply created their own religion and yet claim to be messengers or prophets of God. Buddhism, Islam, Mormonism, Christian Science, Scientology, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and countless other religions have been invented by those claiming to be true prophets of God – men or women like Gautama, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and Ellen White. **"Indeed they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, who try to make My people forget My name by their dreams which everyone tells his neighbor. ... Behold, I am against the prophets, says the LORD, who use their tongues, and say: 'He says'"** (Jeremiah 23:26-27, 31). Jesus said: **"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves"** (Matthew 7:15).

Sometimes even true Christians are misled by Satan to write or say things that are contrary to God's Word. For example, when Jesus told His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem to **"suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed"**, His own disciple Peter objected to what Jesus said about God's plan of salvation. Jesus then **"turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'"** (Matthew 16:21-23). Yet only a short time earlier Peter had confessed: **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"** and Jesus had responded: **"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven"** (Matthew 16:16-17). False teaching of all kinds is so prevalent in the world that the apostle Paul warned the Christians in Rome: **"Note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them"** (Romans 16:17).

God's name and Word is misused also by hypocrites who act as though they are devoted to God but in reality, they are deceivers. They use God's name and God's Word as a cover for their sinful behavior. For example, they go to church on Sunday morning but during the week they live the lives of

unbelievers. Jesus was not deceived by hypocrites, for He could look into their hearts and know their attitudes. Over and over again at the close of His ministry He charged the Pharisees and scribes with hypocrisy, saying to them: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are the whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness”** (Matthew 23:27). Read all of Matthew 23 to learn what Jesus thinks of hypocrisy.

Some of the Jewish people were so afraid of misusing the name of God that they did not use the sacred name JAHVEH or JEHOVAH at all, choosing to substitute another word for it. But God certainly does want us to use His name rightly. As Luther wrote in his *Small Catechism*, we should call upon God’s name in trouble, we should pray to Him, we should praise His name and give thanks to Him, as becomes clear, for example, from the book of Psalms. Almost every psalm includes a proper use of the name of God. God says to us: **“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me”** (Psalm 50:15). In psalm after psalm we find David or one of the other psalmists calling on God in their troubles.

But it is not only in trouble that we should talk to God in prayer. The apostle Paul encouraged us to pray at all times: **“Pray without ceasing”** (1 Thessalonians 5:17); the lines of communication between God and ourselves should always be open. Jesus said: **“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you”** (Matthew 7:7). Both Old Testament and New Testament provide many examples of the right use of God’s name in prayer.

We are urged to use God’s name in words of praise throughout Scripture, especially in the psalms. David wrote: **“Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits”** (Psalm 103:1-2). Praising God means telling God and the whole world how great and wonderful He is. Praising God means sharing the good news of our salvation that He has accomplished with all the world. The book of Psalms concludes with a string of psalms that begin with the words: **“Praise the LORD!”** (Psalms 146-150). Hallelujah!

The psalms also call on us to give thanks to God. We read in Psalm 118: **“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! for His mercy endures forever”** (Psalm 118:1).

The Second Commandment condemns us, just like the First Commandment. We have been guilty and continue to be guilty of taking the name of the Lord in vain. But we sin not only by misusing the name and Word of God. We sin many sins of omission by not taking the opportunity to call on the name of God in our troubles, by not praying to Him regularly and often on every occasion, and especially by not praising His name and giving thanks to Him for all the blessings He has showered on us. Our only hope for salvation is Jesus Christ, who never misused the name of God, nor did He ever fail to call on Him in trouble, to pray, to praise, and to give thanks. Every time He opened His mouth, He was praising the Lord. Even on the cross, as He was forsaken by God because He was being punished for the sin of the world, He still called God His God and cried out to Him in His misery. It is only by faith in Jesus that we receive the forgiveness of sins and His perfect righteousness.

Questions

1. What is meant by the name of God?
2. What are five ways in which we misuse the name of God?
3. What are four ways in which we use the name of God rightly?
4. How do we know that the Second Commandment is part of God's moral law?
5. What is meant by cursing?
6. What kind of cursing is permissible for Christians?
7. What kind of swearing is permissible for Christians?
8. Give some examples of when swearing is misusing the name of God.
9. What is meant by sorcery?
10. How did the prophet Jeremiah describe false teachers?
11. Why did Jesus call the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites?
12. What is the difference between prayer and praise?
13. Which misuse of God's name is most common in your locale?
14. Why can we not be saved by keeping the Second Commandment?
15. Who is the only one who has kept the Second Commandment?