

Scripture: Exodus 20:7; Matthew 5:33-37

Sermon Title: "Check One: __Yes or __No"

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Today we are continuing our journey through the Ten Commandments – these ancient laws given to the Israelites as we consider the third commandment “you shall not make wrongful use of the name of God” or a translation that you may be more familiar with “you shall not take the Lord’s name in vain”. And as we do this we will again be considering the question of what does this law mean for the modern day Christian?

For many, when we hear this command, what do we almost automatically think of? Our minds go straight to cussing, using God’s name as a swear word and this being the way in which we break this commandment. I will admit, as I was preparing for today and realizing that this is where most of our minds go, this got me a little curious and I have been wondering all week what Israelite swear words would have been like – how did they cuss in their 40 year wilderness journey? Just so you know, I haven’t spent anytime researching this question nor do I plan to – but still I am curious. Anyway, I digress, for in fact, this command has much less to do with swear words and much more to do with swearing falsely. Making false oaths or promises in God’s name. That is what is at the heart of this command.

Now, Jesus actually addresses this pretty directly as he is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and we heard his interpretation of making false oaths in God’s name. Basically, Jesus is saying don’t make oaths just let your “yes” be “yes” and “no” be “no”. You don’t have to swear to God, you don’t have to swear on your own life, you don’t have to make promises swearing on anything – let your word be your word. Let who you are, let your name, be all the validation that anyone needs. We shouldn’t have to use God’s name in these promises, for our word, and by extension our name, should be good enough. Our very being, our presence, all the things that make us who we are, which I see as being all held so nicely in the intangible vessel of our name, this should be all that is needed when one says, yes or no. No oath or promise made in the name of

God or any celestial body or anything or anyone in this world – no such oath should be needed. Our word, anchored in our name which holds so much of who we are, should be all that is required when we make a commitment.

So I want to take a moment to think about our names and all that they hold within them. Many of us may know the origin of our name – perhaps it was a family name passed down, being named in honor or celebration of someone else, and so on. Let me share with you about the origin of my name. Now, my father is Jeffrey Allen. When my brother was born, I think it was my mom’s decision to give all of her kid’s names that started with the letter “J”. So my brother was named James, and he was given my father’s middle name so he became James Allen. Now for me, they stuck with the “J” obviously so I became Joshua, but not Joshua Allen, as would have made sense given the pattern that seemed to be developing. No, I became Joshua Michael. Okay. So one day, I must have been in middle school at the time, I asked my mom about my name, because I started to realize that I broke the pattern and so I wondered where Michael came from. And I was ready for some profound explanation – maybe I was being named after some long lost relative or something like that. Rather, as I remember it, my mom tells me that one day she was watching one of those daytime talk shows where they have guests who are experiencing different problems in their lives and there was a delinquent youth on the show who happened to be named “Joshua Michael” and she thought that’s a nice name, let’s go with that. Not the grand origin story I was looking for but a story nonetheless.

Yet, in the end, the most important thing is really not about where our name has come from, though they can honor and can hold much history and value from their origin, the most important thing is about what we do with it once we have it. It’s about what we put into our name, the experiences, the values, the commitments, which will instill trust and confidence from others, which will allow them to hear our “yes” or our “no” and need nothing else because it has come from us and they can trust it because it comes attached with our name and everything we have put into that name.

Still it is not just about people hearing our “yes” or “no” and trusting our word which is based on all the ways that we have built confidence or gained respect. It’s about others hearing us no matter what our response and knowing that they can take what we are saying at face value because it comes attached again with our name. For example, my Uncle Steve was not so much of a “yes” or “no” man – he was a “maybe” and “I don’t know” man. Thinking back, when he was asked to make a commitment of some sort, his answers were never cut and dry. My first memory of experiencing this was one day as a kid, I remember getting some sort of handheld electronic game. I don’t even remember exactly what it did but I remember I was at my Uncle’s house. And the game needed batteries so I asked him if I could have some. A “yes” or “no” question in my mind. And he responded with “I don’t know” and he left it at that. Well, in my mind I was thinking what’s not to know. This is a pretty simple question. This response just didn’t make sense to me and my young mind and it made me crazy. It sent me distraught from the living room into my bedroom at his house. I was so upset, still trying to understand what “I don’t know” meant. I thought he disliked me. Why wouldn’t he just give me the batteries? I was good, wasn’t I? I didn’t do anything mean, did I? I was trying to figure out what I had done wrong. And maybe 10 minutes or so passed and my Uncle came into my room, he was clearly and thoroughly confused as to why I was so upset and he handed me the batteries and walking out of the room, still looking rather confused. Well, I eventually understood what happened. He literally didn’t know if he had batteries. And here is the thing which has always stuck with me – Uncle Steve wasn’t going to make a commitment that he didn’t know whether or not he was able to fulfill it. When I realized this looking back later in life, my trust and confidence and respect for him grew exponentially. And I believe it is partially because of him that I too am not afraid to say “maybe” or “I don’t know”. He saw the power in saying “yes” and “no”. He wanted these words to mean something in his life and so he would only use them when he knew that he could truly fulfill what they required of him.

Beloved People of God, in the end, I say all of this to circle right back to this simple, yet powerful interpretation of Christ's - let your word be "yes, yes" or "no, no". And if someone feels they need something more from you - some oath or promise, swearing on God or something else, my advice to you is don't give it, just live it. If you say "yes", and someone requires you to swear on God's name, just live your "yes" and let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no". Essentially, do what you say and need nothing else to validate it. Let your word and your name carry all the validation that you need. And, sure we all will stumble from time-to-time in fulfilling our commitments, it's part of being human, and in those times we ask for grace and share that grace with others when they stumble, but may we all strive to instill in our name, in our being, in our word, a sense of trust and confidence so that nothing else is indeed required. To the best of our ability, may our "yes" be a lived "yes", our "no" be a lived "no", and even, as I learned from my uncle our "I don't know" be a lived "I don't know", trusted because of who we are in God and needing nothing more. So be it and may it be so. Amen.