

Basics of the Faith: Ten Words: The Law of God (2)
Exodus 20:7
July 5, 2020

Ten little words! But these are weighty words. Among the many words we read and listen to every day: songs, poetry, novels, advertising jingles, newspaper columns, politician's statements, banter with friends on the phone, sermons, whispers of love in our ears, harsh words that cut to the heart, millions of words bombarding our ears every day and week of our lives: few could be named as weighty words that shape our lives and existence. But some words do have power to heal, just as they have power to destroy.

Do you remember those early years of your life when stories moved you deeply, excited your imagination and took you to worlds of wonder never before visited? I remember very well the power of these stories on my young, impressionable imagination. Going to the local library was always an adventure. Reading classics like ***Robinson Crusoe*** and ***Treasure Island*** during my early years had the power to open my imagination to life and wonder beyond my everyday world in our post war Britain. Being open to wonder is a rare and beautiful thing, and a quality we can easily lose in adulthood. I remember especially as an 11-year-old finding the ***Kontikki Expedition*** in the library and being enchanted by the story of their journey across the Pacific on a raft. And still later novels by Dickens, with all their intoxicating language, their spellbinding action and many-sided characters, that create pictures and moods that remain with me.

Robert MacNeil's autobiography, ***Wordstruck***, captures this power of story in our lives. He speaks of the power of Shakespeare in his young life and especially an epiphany moment for him when he met with these haunting words: *How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable Seems to me all the uses of this world.* MacNeil writes that the ironic cast of Shakespeare's words: *released me a little from the prison of my self-absorption, and hooked me into a wider, grander scheme of things. They made me larger, freer.* MacNeil ends the book questioning our disconnection from words today. Words seem, he thinks, to have

little connection to what we believe. Words have become light, disconnected from our character and inner self, as he says: *public words seem to be used increasingly like aerosol room fresheners, to make nice smells.* So many words come our way which have no weight. But that is not true of these ten words from Exodus.

When I was very young, we moved to a new house in one of the many post-war housing estates built all over Britain. Across the fence lived my friend John Addison. He was a little older than me, but often played with the gang of kids in our housing scheme. His mother seemed to have such a heavy load to carry through life and, in popular parlance of the day, seemed a rather “trackled” woman! The fact that a mother of four young children worked out of the home in the 1950’s was unusual enough. What seemed even stranger was the fact that the Addison’s father only appeared on very rare occasions. Divorce and separation in those long-ago days of the 50’s was still unusual enough to be noticed. It seemed strange to me at the time, for Jonnie was the only friend that I knew in a single parent home. In small towns in Scotland in the 50’s where John Knox’s Scottish Church still had considerable influence, being **respectable** was a mark of distinction. In those tight communities, **respectability** stood next to godliness. I can still hear my dear mother saying that so and so was very respectable, while neighbours like Mrs. Addison were to be pitied. The shame, the shame, my kind aunts and mother would whisper as they discussed the standards of respectability in town. None of this disapproval reached the ears of folks like Mrs. Addison, of course, but we children knew who the respectable families were and those who didn’t make the grade.

I don’t hear that word “respectable” much any longer. But it remains true that a good name is still highly prized. I occasionally like to read the back page of the **Globe and Mail** where I find a column in memory of persons whose life is celebrated. These are people whose names were respected for their positive contribution to the good of others. In most cases they tried to leave the world a better place than they found it. A good name, the wise man wrote in Proverbs, is highly to be prized.

According to this commandment before us God's name is also to be honoured. God wishes that his name would resound throughout the earth and that all peoples would worship the true God. Our third commandment reads, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God". The old translation probably captured the sense of the original Hebrew better when it said, "Don't take the name of the Lord in vain." The root meaning of the Hebrew word lying behind our translation is "to be empty, groundless." Flowing from this translation is the sense, therefore, of something or someone being "without substance", or "false". In other words, God takes a dim view of people who claim God's name in their lives when there is little or no substance in their lives to back the claim up.

I turned to Kathleen Norris again to see if she had anything to say on this issue. Not surprisingly she did have some important things to say about the commandments in general. In her book, **Amazing Grace**, she confesses that for years the Ten Commandments left her cold. Church culture in those heady days of the 50's used these commandments like a stick over people's heads, ready to smack us when we went off course. Things like going to the movies on Sunday was considered sinful or smoking tobacco could lead you to the fires of hell. She says:

Tobacco, banjo playing, and dominoes do not figure in the Decalogue as recorded in the Book of exodus. But particularly in 19th and 20th century America, Christians have been adept, and remarkably inventive, at interpreting God's commandments to cover just about anything they don't approve of. The effect, of course, is to make the surpassingly large God of the scriptures into a petty Cosmic Patrolman.

On that note I want us to see, and it's worth repeating, that God didn't intend that these Commandments would act like a traffic cop. They were designed to open up the good life to us, not put us into a straightjacket. These commandments are a code to create harmony in community, to keep evil in check, and to lead us ultimately to Christ. Lifting up God's name in our lives, spreading God's good reputation where we work and play and, in

our homes, brings joy, meaning, and hope to society. Let's think of our uplifted hands as our lives lifted up to God in service and prayer, both for ourselves and for our neighbour. Such a life honours God and opens to us the good life.

That's the positive side of this commandment. What's the down side? What are the ways that I might dishonour God's name in my life? Taking God's name in vain is popularly thought of as cursing. I admit that it does grate me when I am playing with a golfer who constantly curses the name of God. It's never "Oh Pontius Pilate", "Oh, Julius Caesar", or "Oh, Aristotle," when the ball disappears into the creek. It's usually "Jesus Christ", this, or "Jesus Christ" that. Strange isn't it why they constantly use the name of the one that they generally ignore in their lives!

But I don't think that this is getting at the heart of the commandment. When it reads, "Don't make wrongful use of the name of God," the force of the command is directed at the emptiness of our claim to be acting or speaking in God's name when there is no reality behind it. In short, if for example, we claim to be Christians, and yet live our lives as if God and Christ didn't exist, wouldn't that be false? I suppose even when our priorities, namely how we spend our money, how we spend our time, how we use our gifts, put God and Christ on the back burner of our lives, not first in our lives, then this command is relevant. God says to us through this commandment, if you want to know the good life, if you want to know joy, deep satisfaction, a sense of being centered in love and hope, if you want all this, then put me at the centre. Don't dishonour my name in the world by false claims.

These commandments need to be taken seriously. They offer life, but they also threaten punishment. Putting God tenth on our priority list is not pleasing to God. Claiming to be a person of faith, but not taking it seriously is to be open to judgment. Scripture consistently tells us that God finds apathy and lack of passionate commitment highly displeasing. Hence the closing phrase, "for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name." We are in Paul's terms, "bought with a price; we are not our own." Have you discovered the "good life" that flows out of

obedience to God's will for your life? Or are you seeking that so-called "good life" that society promises you and your family? Taking faith seriously is another of the gateways the commandments offer into the good life.

Yes, these are weighty words, these ten little words from God through Moses and Israel. May their weight lighten our lives, not anchor us in despair and judgment.

Amen