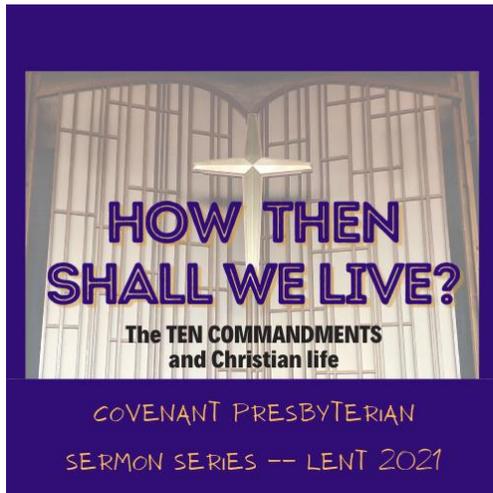


## How Then Shall We Live Lenten Series: "Convenient Fig Leaves"

MATTHEW 7:15-21

JEFF FOX-KLINE | SERMON FOR SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2021



And so Lent continues. Lent, which is a season of waiting, always feels different from Advent, yet another season of waiting. In Advent the focus is on the expectancy—how we can be ready for the Good News coming into the world. But in Lent the focus is on how we live now that we know that the Good News was here. A time of penitence and quiet focus on how we respond to God's revelation. How are we transformed by the Good News, and how then shall we live?

This theme—How then shall we live—is echoed every month at Covenant as we recite together the ten commandments. It is also the theme of our sermons through Lent. Listen now to the reading of the ten commandments from Exodus 20, from the Message translation, read by some of our wonderful confirmands...

Today we are focusing on the third commandment: According to Exodus 20:7, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name." Or as we more commonly say, "Do not take the Lord's name in vain."

Now, being good midwestern folks, that's something we have a lot of experience with. I believe that Wisconsin has probably the best way of avoiding taking the Lord's name in vain: "cripes," which is used as an exclamation in place of saying "Christ." Fun fact, below the definition of "cripes" on Google is an example sentence: "Joyce is on the warpath, cripes!" which is a fun sentence, unless you're Joyce. If we want to really express our displeasure we put in the intensifier "Almighty" to let people know we really mean it. "Joyce just threw the water cooler through a window, cripes almighty!"

That's one way we avoid taking the Lord's name in vain, but let's be honest, who do we think we're fooling? I respond when people say the name "Jess" in a room that I'm in. I bet Jesus does the same.

My family has a book that we read together called *Sunday Morning* about two rambunctious kids who are waiting impatiently for their parents to wake up on a Sunday morning, and in one of the pages the narrator says, "I walk around our bedroom saying 'God I'm hungry. God I'm hungry because there are no grown-ups around to tell me don't say God.'"

These are the messages we receive from the third commandment. This is how we imagine the third commandment functioning in our world. To not take the Lord's name in vain is to avoid saying it in polite company—that we avoid blasphemy just by avoiding saying God's name at all. Is that really avoiding taking the Lord's name in vain, though? Chadian pastor Abel Ndjerareou, in his commentary on the book of Exodus, says "This command does not set out to forbid every use of God's name; rather, its goal is to protect the integrity of God's name." When we choose to say "Cripes" or "Oh my gosh" or another favorite, "Cheese and rice," we are deciding that God's name is more important than whatever we may be upset about. But we can't let that be the extent to which we avoid taking the Lord's name in vain. In fact, all told, this is pretty small potatoes in the scale of taking the Lord's name in vain.

Because saying Jesus Christ when you stub your toe does much less of a disservice to Christianity than other Christians do on a daily basis. Abuse of the Lord's name runs rampant in our culture, whenever Jesus is invoked in ways that do harm to God's children and God's creation. Think about the street preachers you see, shouting fire and brimstone, damnation for anyone who doesn't believe exactly right. Think about the television preachers telling you that if you donate just enough to them, just keep giving the right amount of money, then God will bless you and not a moment sooner. The people who commit acts of violence and destruction while waving the banner of Christ. Think about it, which one of these is a bigger abuse of the Lord's name: this image of "Mac and Cheesus," which is a bag of Jesus-shaped pasta and "real cheddar cheesus," or this image of a man wearing a cross on his shirt as he stormed the US Capital building on January 6?

In this light, the deepest sin of taking the Lord's name in vain becomes apparent. What does God command of us? That we maintain the holiness of

God's name. That we show due respect and honor to the sacred wonder that is our creator. And we see this all over the place. People claiming the authority of God in order to advance their personal agendas. People who say they are acting in the name of the Lord, when they are really acting in the name of self-interest. The Westminster Catechism—one of our confessions in the Presbyterian Church—dives deeply into the ten commandments, and in discussing the third commandment it says (among a very large list of prohibited sins) that the third commandment prohibits “misinterpreting, misapplying, or any way perverting the Word, or any part of it, to profane jests, curious and unprofitable questions, vain janglings, or the maintaining of false doctrines.”

First, if any of you are thinking about pursuing vain janglings, I have bad news for you. More importantly, though, it specifically calls out using ‘misinterpreting, misapplying and perverting the Word.’ There is no worse perversion of the Lord's name than to use it to hurt others for your own gain. Full stop. If you've ever felt bad for using the Lord's name in vain when you stubbed your toe, or for passing along a blasphemous meme on Facebook, know that it pales in comparison to those who would pervert the word of God to abuse and degrade other people.

Responsibly using the Lord's name means taking scripture, taking the Lord's name, and using it in a way that gives glory to God. But how do we do that? One lens through which we can view scripture is mentioned in another confession in our Book of Confessions, which is the “Rule of Faith and Love” found in the Second Helvetic Confession. A beautiful explanation of this rule was written in 1983 in a document entitled “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture,” which says “The fundamental expression of God's will is the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor, and all interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God... Any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that separates or sets in opposition love for God and love for fellow human being, including both love expressed in individual relations and in human community.”

If we want to use the Lord's name respectfully, then we need to look at why we use the Lord's name. Are we using scripture to merely bolster our position? Are we using it to get something out of it? Are we doing it to put other people down? If the answer to any of this is ‘yes’ then we need to reexamine why

we're using God's name and realize that we're using it in vain. However, if we ask ourselves *Will this make the world better? Does this show God's love to our neighbor? Does this bind us closer together in the Spirit?* and the answer is yes, then we are following God's calling and using God's name responsibly.

And there's a tangible outcome when we use the Lord's name responsibly. Listen to Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew:

<sup>15</sup> “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will know them by their fruits. <sup>21</sup> “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

In this passage, Jesus talks about those who abuse God's name, who take it in vain. We will know those who take the Lord's name in vain by the fruits that they bear. The wicked and selfish uses of God's name yield wicked and selfish results. But the opposite of that is true when we use the Lord's name responsibly. When we use the Lord's name for the Lord's work then we bear good fruit, and we honor God with the fruit we bear.

Look at the collection we took for our friends at the Lussier Center. Over 460 pounds of household items to help our neighbor. That is bearing good fruit and bearing witness to God's holy name. Look at our recent blood drive, where we collected 28 units of blood. That's the kind of fruit that shows God's love to those in need. What are some of the things you do in your life that bear good fruit? How does that bear witness to the goodness of God's name?

You shall not take the Lord's name in vain. That's the command. But I say to you, you shall use the Lord's name to build the kingdom of God. So, go now and bear good fruit in the name of the great God who loves you and whose love is made manifest in the world through you.