

Title: On commandment #3...

Date: 3/3/2024 (Lent 3, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Exodus 20:1-17](#); [1 Corinthians 1:18-25](#); [John 2:13-22](#); [Psalm 19](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/Lent-3-On-Commandment-3-e2gj8lo>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/LYoQ5afW5ag?t=1239>

Your law, O God, is perfect and revives the soul;
your testimony is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent.
Your statutes are just and rejoice the heart;
your commandment is clear and gives light to the eyes. (Ps 19:7-8, The Saint Helena Psalter)

Please be seated.

If these words sound familiar, the reason is that all of Psalm 19 or portions of it appears **seven** times in our three-year cycle of readings.¹ We can take that as a sign that the themes and belief proclaimed in this psalm are pretty important.

And given that the psalm assigned for each Sunday is a response to the Old Testament reading that serves as the first lesson, we can also take this repetition as a sign of the importance of the Torah, the law, in our faith.

But there are two parts to this psalm, and it's important that we not skip over the first half.

The commentaries I read present these two halves in the following ways:

- The first half is about the glory of God as seen in creation, and the second is about the gift and goodness of God's law as seen in our lives.
- The first half shows that all of creation speaks of God and praises God, and the second half reveals the blessings of the benefits and beauty of the law given by God.
- God's plan and purpose is revealed indirectly in the first half, and directly and explicitly in the second half.

When the Psalmist shifts from the first part to the second, it can feel abrupt, disjointed. Why is that?

Some people find God in nature, but have a hard time finding God in churches. The connection they feel with God when they are standing in the forest or sitting on the beach or swimming in the water is stretched thin and maybe even snaps when they are going about their day-to-day life.

Some people believe there exists something bigger than themselves, but they're not sure what that is. They don't think any single religious tradition has all the answers, and they are cynical about any group that claims to.

Some people believe that there is something “like God” out there, but they’re not sure they want to commit to the God that makes the news most often. They are skeptical of Christians whose goals are to make the United States a “Christian” nation and seek to enforce by law, by force, what **they** consider to be “Christian” values.

I don’t blame them. There are days I’m frustrated with my own denomination, not to mention other people’s. I get angry at people who selectively read and enforce the commandments. I want to shake the people who are so focused on using these laws to push out rather than embrace, to control rather than respect.

In the eyes of human wisdom, the law can be a source of strength and certainty. With the law, they build walls to protect what is theirs and keep out anyone and anything that threatens their hold on what they’ve got. Through the law, they impose their picture of an orderly kingdom on earth. The law is their line in the sand between right and wrong.

In my teens, I heard the commandment “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” simplified as “no swearing.” How many of you grew up with that understanding?

I was told that it would be disrespectful to misuse the name of God. So, while we should avoid cursing in general, we should definitely avoid cursing with the words “God,” “Jesus,” or “Christ” in particular. Abbreviating it to JFC would still count as breaking the commandment, as would using dashes, as in G— darn it.

So, whenever the Ten Commandments come up, my brain skips over this one. No swearing, no cursing, got it. Let’s move on to the good stuff. Let’s talk about keeping the Sabbath. Let’s talk about what it means to honor deeply flawed if not outright harmful parents. Let’s talk about the idols we worship and the god we’ve made in our image.

In recent years, I’ve learned more about Christianity. I know more about the numerous ways we can read and interpret the Bible. I’ve heard all kinds of claims about what God wants and what Jesus would do. I’ve struggled with verses that have been used to diminish the very same people Jesus came to lift up. All this is to say, I’ve come to see the importance of this commandment.

This is about so much more than not swearing. When we make wrongful use of the name of God, the consequences are deadly. Throughout human history, lands have been claimed and groups of people have been massacred in the name of God. LGBTIA+ folks have been told that they are less than, that they are abominations. Women have been told they cannot lead or teach in church, that it is their Christian duty to stay in abusive relationships, that it is their fault for tempting the men. We plunder the earth’s resources when we understand stewardship of creation to mean ownership and control. In the name of God, some deaths are considered murders while others are justified in the name of law and order.

When we apply the law with human wisdom, we become so focused on being right that we forget that the law is about bringing us into right relationship with God and all of

creation and our neighbors. We forget that God gave the law in the context of our interconnectedness. Without fear or awe of God, we apply the law as **we** judge.

One of my friends said the best way to evangelize, to share our faith and spread the gospel, is to tell people we are Christian and then not be a jerk. It sounds so easy, so simple.

Then I read the news or hear all these soundbites that make me want to tear my hair out because I don't see Jesus in some of the people who claim they want to protect and safeguard the values they call Christian. I don't see the loving, liberating and life-giving way of Jesus in what they say or do.

Now, the people I think this about may feel the same way toward me. One time I was standing in Grand Central Station, waiting for a train back to seminary. Even though I had headphones on, a young man approached me with a tract, a small pamphlet, and asked me if I've accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I smiled and pointed to the Yale Divinity School logo on my hoodie, and he tried even harder to push that piece of paper into my hand, "Oh, you need this even more."

Just as the grass is always greener on the other side, perhaps it's easier to see Jesus turning over the tables over there. We might imagine ourselves whooping and cheering as he cracks the whip and pours out the coins and flips the tables. And that sense of satisfaction might be short-lived the moment we realize that he's now looking at us.

It's important to recognize and call out the wrongful use of the name of God, to remind people that God loves all of God's children, full stop, no exception. It's not up to us to tell God who belongs in the family of God and who should be kicked out. No matter how strongly some people insist, God has no preference for one form of government over another, no preference for one nation over another.

Every time we want to call out someone else, it's also time to hold up a mirror to ourselves. As we question other people's interpretation of the Bible and the ways in which they use the name of God, we can't be afraid to examine our own.

We need to see the wrongful use of the name of God in terms of what we have left **undone** and **unsaid**. Think about the times we've stayed silent, when we thought it'd be easier to just not get involved. Evangelism isn't just about not being a jerk, it's also about loving fiercely and well.

We also need to recognize the wrongful use of the name of God and in the things that have been said and done on our behalf. It's hard to speak up in the circles closest to us, our own family or church, our own school or workplace. It's hard to start when we want things to be better but there's no clear roadmap for getting there.

No matter who we are, we can have good intentions and still miss the mark. What makes us Christian is how we react, how we change course throughout our lives and turn back to God, again and again.

The people in charge of the temple didn't see themselves as allowing practices that made wrongful use of the name of God. The people driven out by Jesus didn't set out to desecrate the house of God. There were sellers of sheep, cattle, and doves in the temple because pilgrims needed to buy them to make offerings.

There were money changers in the temple because pilgrims had to convert the currency they arrived with into the currency accepted for paying temple taxes. They saw their work as a necessary part of worship.

They didn't realize they started missing the mark when they approached their work as a business and not a ministry. They didn't realize they were no longer right with God when they started looking for ways to optimize their profit margins instead of the experience of the pilgrims. They didn't realize they were no longer aligned with the purposes of God when they narrowed their focus to what **they** were entitled to.

Yes, they should be able to earn a living from their work. I'd be a hypocrite if I said people shouldn't be paid for their ministry. And it's all too easy to start making it about us, to make poor choices with the power and authority granted us. It can be easy to forget who and what all of this is for.

When we rely on human wisdom, we want things to be clear and concrete. We want a goal to hit. We want that line that tells us we got it right and other people got it wrong. It'd be much easier if we can simplify this one commandment to "Don't swear" or "Don't curse." Then we can check it off our to-do list.

The law of God simplifies things **and** complicates them at the same time. It enlightens us **and** shows us how far we still have to go. It rejoices the heart and sinks it at the same time. It gives light to the eyes and shows us how much we are still in the dark. In keeping them there is great reward, but not the kind we can deposit in the bank. The law of God is a yoke that is heavy and a burden that is light. When we are in awe of God, we will have more questions than answers. When we seek to follow the law of God, we will be in this state of always striving but never arriving.

It sounds tiring and not that rewarding. It seems confusing and messy. It feels like we're being set up to fail if this means we actually have to talk about and wrestle with what's happening in the world right now, to lament the more than 30,000 Palestinians that have been killed in Gaza since Oct 7² and to condemn the actions of the hostage takers, to honor the sacredness of life and to support equity in opportunities to do more than just survive but to thrive, to allow our hearts to break for and with one another and feel the heaviness in our souls...

This sounds like foolishness, doesn't it?

And yet...and yet...and yet...

¹ Charles A. Wiley, [“Theological Perspective on Psalm 19,”](#) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 80.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68430925>