

Misuse of Power

An edited transcription of the sermon by Rev. Rachel Rivers
from the October 14, 2001 Worship Service at the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church
Scripture Readings: Exodus 20:7 and John 14:12-21

The purpose of religion is to help us to connect with what's most holy, with what's most meaningful, with what's most significant. The purpose of religion is to help us to connect with the Divine. From a Swedenborgian perspective whatever helps us to do this is *religious*.

How do we connect with what is meaningful and significant and purposeful and not get lost in all of the worries and fears and uncertainties that can overwhelm our daily lives? The ten commandments have been given to us to show us how. Today we are looking at the commandment that tells us "you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." We are looking at how recognizing what we do to break this commandment and how living lives more in accordance with it can help us to live lives of deeper purpose and significance.

On the surface this commandment may look insignificant. What's the real harm in misusing God's name? Why did this particular prohibition make the top ten list? If you were to think up ten rules that would help you live more significant and meaningful lives, would you put this commandment on that list? What is it about misusing the name of God, of using the Lord's name in vain, that is so dangerous to our spiritual well-being? Let's take a look.

The natural or literal meaning of this commandment is talking about using the name of God when we don't mean it, or especially when we are trying to convince somebody that what we're saying is true even though we know that it's not. In this literal meaning of the commandment we are using the name of God for our own self-interest. For example, we are selling someone our old refrigerator and they are skeptical about how well it works, and we know its thermostat is out of whack and we say, "I swear to God it works like a dream!"

There is also a deeper inner meaning and significance to this and to all of the commandments. They aren't just rules and modes of civil and moral behavior: they are also here to help guide our *religious* behavior. If we follow them on this deeper, interior level, they help us connect with the divine, with what's significant. They help us live more full, rich, and meaningful lives.

Last week we talked about an image that came from Christopher Bache about each person being like a leaf on a gigantic tree and how oftentimes in life, the twigs and limbs and trunk of the tree become invisible to us. We think we're just leaves hanging out there, separate and independent and apart, lonely; but in reality, we're all leaves on a living tree, and we are all connected with those twigs and branches and trunk, even though we oftentimes can't see them. The role of religion is to help us to feel that connection to the tree, that connection to *life*, and to remember that we are all here for one another.

In an inner sense the name of God doesn't just refer to God's name or what we call him. "Name" means *character*. The name of God means *everything God is*, so it means God's holiness, it means love, it means truth, it means power. So when we're misusing the name of God, we're misusing love, we're misusing truth, and we're misusing power. In a way what we're doing is we're claiming God's love and truth and power for our own ends. Instead of asking ourselves, "what do all these leaves on the tree need? What do the leaves that are closest to me need? What do the leaves that are far away from me on this tree need?" Instead of asking those questions, we ask ourselves, "what do I, this one leaf, need? And how can I take the energy from this tree and use it just for me?"

Misusing the name of God on this inner level means justifying seeking our own self-centered ends with religious principles. For example many years ago I once knew a man who was a salesman, and unfortunately he wasn't a very good one. He was also the treasurer of his local church. He believed the best way to provide for his family was to put a little money in the stock market one week, in what he knew were sure bets, and to take many times what he put in out the next week. He tried that with the money that was in his family, but it was soon gone. So then what he did was take the money out of the church funds and put it into the stock market so that he could reimburse his own losses, and make some extra money for the church at the same time.

The rationale in his mind was, "Oh so sure I'm taking out \$50,000, but I will put back in \$75,000 before anybody even knows the \$50,000 is missing." Do you see how that's taking a religious principle—doing good, providing for our family, providing for our church—but misusing it to justify one's own ends? He was telling himself that what he was doing was for the good of his family, but in reality he was just justifying his own way of being. He did lose the

money, and he did get caught, but whether he had lost the money or not, from a spiritual perspective he was misusing God's name and deviating from a spiritual path.

We all, to some degree, misuse God's love, God's truth, God's power. We all to some degree, use our religious principles and ideals as ways to try to justify our own position. It's like trying to use God as our servant rather than us being servants to God.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Hallowing God's name is the opposite of misusing God's name. Hallowing God's name means recognizing in God a divine power higher than ourselves and opening ourselves to its deep love and wisdom. In this time of great uncertainty in our world there can be a tendency to pull in and constrict ourselves, constrict our energies, and constrict whom we feel safe with and whom we can trust. Hallowing God's name means believing in a safety and a certainty and a love and a compassion that is inherent in life itself, even when that isn't so visible to the eye. It means finding a way to answer the anxiousness we may be feeling these days with making visible the limbs and branches and trunk of that tree.

When we invite God's hallowedness, God's *holiness*, into our presence, it helps us look forward with wonder and trust at this life that God has given us. It helps us look at and discern how we may be misusing power in ways that justify and defend our own position instead of opening up to the greater good.

In the Bible it says we will be punished if we misuse the name of God. The Swedenborgian understanding of this is that God never chooses to punish anyone, but the punishment is what we sometimes call *a natural consequence*. It means that what happens is a result of what we do. When we constrict and let our own greed or pride or fear hold us back, the natural consequence of that is that we feel more cut off from that tree on which we are all leaves. God never cuts God's self off from any of us, but God gives us the freedom to feel separate and to engage in behaviors that make us feel more alone—and sometimes that can feel like a safer thing to do. But God also implants within each one of us the extraordinary courage to reach out and risk being vulnerable in order to connect. God gives us the courage to dare to remember and to think and to discern what we ourselves are doing in our lives to shut out the love and truth of God.

The ten commandments are not like a test where we're supposed to see how we're getting them all right. What is much more helpful on the religious path is to notice how we are *breaking* these commandments. Do you know why? Because if we can notice the mistakes we are making and in what ways we are swerving off course—in this case, if we can notice how we are misusing the power of love and truth that God has given us, then we can do something about it. Each step that we take in this regard not only benefits ourselves in our moving into lives of greater meaning and significance, but it also benefits every other single leaf on this tree as well.

God gives us an extraordinary promise: if we take even the smallest steps towards paying attention to recognizing how we break God's commandments, God's principles of being, and readjust our course, then we will continue to find our lives more full of meaning and purpose and significance. We are promised that no matter what we have done, whatever misuse of power, whatever misuse of truth or love, that God is always reaching out to each and every one of us in every moment, inviting us to return to God's loving embrace.

Lord, hallowed be thy name. Amen.