

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

The Second Commandment:

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

At first glance this commandment is easy enough to understand. We must have respect for the Lord's name. But we might wonder as to why a name is so important that God would devote one of the Ten Commandments to it. To understand this we must recall that in the ancient world and among the Jewish people the disclosure of a name belonged to the order of trust and intimacy.

Though individuals could be publicly known by their surname, title or occupation, personal names were shared only among close friends or family. We retain some of this custom in the way that we usually expect children to address adults not by their first names but by their title or by their title and last name. Thus it was a great gift and honor that the eternal, awesome and unchanging God should reveal his name to us. Our response to this must always be one of gratitude and of silent loving adoration of his name. We should not introduce it into speech except to bless, praise and glorify.

Cursing & Blasphemy

It is clear that to use the name of God the Father or the Lord Jesus to curse, condemn or berate others is wholly inappropriate. Many people call this "swearing" though to be precise, "swearing" involves taking an oath. We might better call this cursing or blasphemy.

Blasphemy consists in uttering against God words of hatred, reproach or defiance. This may be done inwardly or outwardly. Also related to the sin of blasphemy is speaking ill of God or of failing to respect him in our speech.

Blasphemy and vain use of God's name are hardly rare today. When we consider the movies, books, and music of our own day it is shocking to consider how frequently the Name of the Lord is used profanely. Directors and authors often claim they must include such language to reflect an accurate portrait of real human interactions. Sadly there is some truth in their claim. We clearly live in a society that is increasingly contemptuous of God's great and glorious name. This is why each of us should consider how we might be more faithful to the second commandment.

The wider meaning of "vain"

This is why it is also important to reflect on the meaning of the word "vain" Vain means "empty" or "insincere." Thus we should avoid using God's name in an empty fashion. The most common way this is done is by expressions such as "Oh my God!" or "Lord!" Such an expressions are usually not meant to be irreverent. But they are most often said in an unreflective manner that reduces God's name to a mere expression of surprise or exasperation. In some, the habit of using this expression is so ingrained that they are hardly aware that they are doing it. This makes it a "vain" or empty use of the name of God and it is clearly not the ideal

to which the second commandment draws us. The name of God is to be used with great reverence and in a reflective, prayerful manner, *O Lord how excellent is thy name in all the earth!*

The swearing of oaths

A final but very important area of consideration in terms of the second commandment is the swearing of oaths. Swearing an oath in God's name is to take God as a witness to what one affirms. It also calls upon divine truthfulness as a pledge of one's own truthfulness. When it is truthful and legitimate an oath highlights the relationship of human speech with God's truth. A false oath however calls God to be witness to a lie and is absolutely contrary to the holiness of the divine name. Jesus urges great caution in making oaths (Mt 5:33-34) but following St. Paul (2 Cor. 1:23; Gal 1:20), the tradition of the Church has understood Jesus words as not excluding oaths made for grave and right reasons (for example in court).

In all our words and actions we are called to honor the name of the Lord. Knowing God's name is a sign that God has deigned to enter into an intimate, personal relationship with us. This should inspire gratitude, reverence and love. Each time the divine name sounds in our ears or stirs within our souls there should sweep over us an immense feeling of love and of being loved. *Blessed be the name of the Lord!*