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Part 1 – How people turn articles of religious practice into raging monsters

People are funny.

I am thinking especially of religious people, and I’m thinking especially of the way religious people sometimes take a tenet of their faith or a doctrine or a teaching and get so carried away with trying to observe or practice that teaching that they end up completely misconstruing it.

Take Sabbath-keeping for instance as it is sometimes practiced in both Jewish and Christian traditions. The “day of rest” was established in the 10 Commandments, “Remember the sabbath and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do your work but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God,” and so on.

Prior to this wonderful gift, all days were the same. There were no weekends and everyone worked seven days a week. Along comes the 4th commandment, and the invention of the weekend! What an incredible blessing.

But in Judaism, this gift of rest was turned into a great religious burden famously clarified by Jesus who did work on the Sabbath and said, “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” meaning *man does not exist for the sole purpose of keeping the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made as a gift for man.*

Jesus castigated the Pharisees and religious people of his day who fussed about the *sin* of picking heads of grain to munch on, like we would pick berries, but doing it on the Sabbath! What a terrible sin!

So if sabbath-keeping turns into something of a burden rather than a gift, it is not what it was meant to be. Regrettably, modern-day observant Jews still treat the sabbath day as something less than a wonderful gift of rest.

But Christians sometimes do the same thing. In some stricter sects, one of which I used to belong to, the “Lord’s Day” doesn’t feel very gift-like. The more pious strains are known to debate whether going out to eat on Sunday after church is a “violation” of the 4th commandment, or preparing food at home, or going for a walk, or getting sweaty playing football in the park at a picnic.

Yes, people are funny that way.

Maybe they get worked up because it is included in a list of “commandments.” Like, *ooooh! Look out!* Don't break God's *commandments* or he will harrow thee with grievous plagues and judgements.

For those who follow Jesus, he corrected the way we should think about the Sabbath. Don't think of it as a law, a commandment. Think of it as a blessing. Follow his example and pick berries if you want to.

Part 2 – Response: but I'm just trying to honor God

People will answer, “But I *delight* to keep God's laws! Have you never experienced the delight of obedience? It's a joy to me. It's a way I demonstrate my love for him. If I suffer inconvenience, if I have to prepare meals the day before so I don't have to work on the Lord's Day, I count that a privilege to endure such a minor burden for the sake of the God I love and who saved me! I would do this and much more for the God I love!”

“Furthermore, when I live in a way that is counter-cultural, and people see that, it gives me a way to bear witness to the world about my faith and my God. If I say, ‘Sorry I can't go out to eat with you, or drive a car, or turn on the lights, or answer the phone,’ I take a certain pleasure in being different, in showing the world that my people live to a higher standard, that I take my religion seriously.”

Part 3 – God is a good father who didn't establish laws to trouble us

I will forgo responding to the lurking pride and snobbery implicit in such an attitude.

I will instead posit this question: how does God want us to live? And why?

First, Why. In other words, what's God's motivation for establishing rules for living? I think we should take cues from how Jesus spoke about the sabbath and apply them to other rules and restrictions that religion wants to place on us.

It was a gift, man. Enjoy it.

Start with the idea of God as a loving father. A real, not-just-a-metaphor, father. A father over against every other anthropomorphism and figure we use to describe him, like a Judge, or a Deity Who Smites, or the One who pours bowls of judgment on the earth, or The Holy One who Demands that we Cower and Grovel Before Him.

No, a father.

Come with me on this. He made humans to be with him. Maybe you need to let that sink in.

He wants the friendship and love and community of humanity. That's it, and nothing else.

There's nothing more basic than that. He didn't make humanity because he needed billions of tiny creatures to worship him. He doesn't have an ego complex. He's not self-centered.

He's a father who had children whom he loves and just wants to be with them. Kinda the way I am a father and just love to be with my children.

Is it possible that the whole reason for earthly family, for parents having children and all that, is at rock bottom simply to illustrate the relationship God wants to have with each and every one of us?

That is, a *good* father, the best possible father, the ultimate and perfect father who loves perfectly and gives perfect gifts. Who is so full of love that he started this whole, entire project for the final goal of being together with the children he made. Is that possible?

I think it is absolutely the case.

Now, I ask you, would such a father rejoice in the sufferings of his children? Would such a father take satisfaction when his children endure frustrations and restrictions and burdens for him?

Would I?

Consider this case:

If I learned that my son drove the speed limit when all his friends were urging him to drive fast solely because he was thinking of me, and the fact that I pay his insurance, and that if he got a ticket, it would cost me more money, I would be honored by that.

But if I gave my son a car and said, "Here, this is so you don't have to walk to your job at the grocery store anymore," and he, in some sick wish to strictly obey to the nth degree my dictum about the car, refused to drive it to school or to a movie, or to take a girl out on a date saying, "NO! My most righteous sire and progenitor, the one who gave me birth and life, in his gracious mercy he gave me this car *to get to work!* And I will not violate his commands or denigrate his purpose by driving *anywhere* else but to my job, for such would be a grievous sin." Well, you get my point.

And to further illustrate, if I gave my son a car to get to work, and he boasted to his friends his firm refusal to drive anywhere except to work, and he held up his abstinence as a mark of pride and membership in our family, wanting to bear witness before a watching world what kind of dad I am, thinking that he honored my memory while everyone was thinking, "Geez, your dad sounds like an asshole," well you see my point again.

God's not an asshole! So why do you live and boast to others that he is one?

If you observe the sabbath as a series of restrictions because you think God takes pleasure in your inconvenience, you are wrong.

If you observe the sabbath as a series of restrictions because you think you bring him honor by your sacrifice, you are actually serving Religion, not God.

It was meant to be a gift all along. Not a series of restrictions. A day off. A weekend. A time to turn your eyes away from your onerous job. In fact, it is the very first beginnings of a coming future seven-day a week weekend.

The sabbath rest flowed out of the creation story. Sin and the curse condemned us to toil, by the sweat of our brow. That was the starting point. However, God took a day off after creation. The seventh day.

And in the 10 Commandments, he was saying, "Do like I did. Take a day off. That bit about the curse and *the sweat of your brow*, well, I guess I'm relenting on that. Take a day off. Because

I've got a bigger plan that will blow you away! A plan of redeeming every human from the curse, and ultimately giving everyone rest from their toil the whole week long."

Part 4 – My personal experience with this

I could name other ways that we have taken aspects of our religion and turned them into flails with which to lash ourselves, to the glory of God.

Church attendance. Daily devotions. Fasting. Abstaining from various things. All of these worthwhile practices can be turned into obligations done in the name of duty and with dutiful joy.

Legalism. We've all been down that rabbit hole.

But what I want to focus on is the way we uncritically receive beliefs, practices and assumptions from prior generations and just accept them.

I have a personal history with this.

Quickly, when I was undergoing examinations and interviews to become a Presbyterian pastor, I had to explain a view I had come to adopt called *paedocommunion*, that is, the view that any infant who can take solid food should be admitted to the communion table. I came to this view after reading and studying while in seminary, and it caused me a bit of a headache when I tried to apply for ordination in my denomination. Nobody had ever heard of it. And because it was different and outside the pale of normal Presbyterian thinking, my examiners questioned me pretty hard on it. Very few theologians or reformers throughout church history have held this view, they said. "Calvin didn't teach paedocommunion!" one elder said. For virtually all of church history, children had been restricted from the communion table until they reached an age of accountability, or had completed a catechism class, or made a profession of faith.

But after studying the issue and the Bible, and after finding the argument compelling, I adopted the position. Everyone else in the room was quite happy with the received practice of barring children from the communion table. To this day, I can argue compellingly for paedocommunion.

Which is all well and good, but my point is, we receive beliefs and practices from prior generations. And we often do not question them.

Part 5 – The 3rd Commandment: why is *taking the Lord's name in vain* such a big deal?

So the subject I really want to address is the 3rd Commandment. What is prohibited in it and why?

As a reminder, the 3rd commandment is, "You shall not take the Lord's name in vain. For the Lord will not hold him blameless who takes his name in vain."

Sounds pretty serious, right?

So why is this the most obscure, vague, and inscrutable of all the commandments? What can it possibly mean to *take the Lord's name in vain*?

And why is such importance attached to it?

It comes with a threat! *The Lord will not hold him blameless* who does this. Does what? Name? in vain? What does that even mean?

Well.

The way it has been handed down to us is that it means avoiding saying a few phrases that include some form of word that we use to name who we are talking about when we talk about God. These are,

Jesus.

Christ.

God.

Most people think that keeping the 3rd Commandment means avoiding *Jesus* and *Christ* and *God* when we are not actually talking about him, using a name in the same way we would use “wow!”

As in, “Jesus Christ, it’s hot in here,” or “Christ, not another extended vehicle warranty offer,” and, not to be excluded, “God damn, Steve, would you stop? I’m not going to sing *Freebird* karaoke!”

Is that what the 3rd commandment is about? Consider the following:

1. Why is God such a snowflake about his literal name? I’m not so sensitive about my name. If you said, “*Sweet Jeffrey*, it’s hot in here,” I wouldn’t mind. In fact, I might feel a slight honor that it was *my* name you chose to declare.
2. If you were tasked with making 10 laws to govern the whole world, would you make one of them “Nobody can misuse my name, everyone has to say Jeffrey in the right way.” No, you would probably focus on prohibiting murder and crime and injustice.
3. Does God really *even have a name*? “God” is not a name, it’s a title. Same for Lord, Father, Abba, Adonai, etc. What about Yahweh? Isn’t that his *real* name? That just means “I am” in Hebrew. It’s as if Moses said, “What should I call you?” and God chuckled to himself and said (because the ultimate One doesn’t get called by a *name*), “just call me The One Who Exists, existence itself.” You don’t just call God by a name, like Glen or Oliver. That’s a testament to his highest position; he is never *named*.
4. Many Catholics and unstrict Jews have much less problem with Christ and goddamn than Evangelicals. Jewish filmmakers Steven Spielberg and the Coen Brothers have dialog with characters using these words. I’m reading a novel by Robert Farrar Capon, a deeply insightful Episcopal priest, as I write this in which he has characters saying “Christ...” Do these people know something the rest of us don’t know?

Part 6 – But the Westminster Confession!

I know that many of my Reformed and conservative friends will refer me to the Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 112 and 113, for a thorough explanation of the 3rd commandment and what it entails. It is exhausting.

How do I express that I no longer follow the Westminster Confession as I once did. I find it to be outdated and flat wrong in a number of places, and hopelessly overwhelmed by 17th century assumptions and attitudes.

But if you want to plead Westminster, let me ask you, how do you feel about the phrase, “*Oh my God?*” Do you use it? Westminster condemns you. Do you ever even write *OMG*? Just as bad. In fact, according to Westminster’s explanation, all of the following phrases are verboten:

- Gosh
- Golly
- Geez
- Damn
- Oh Lord
- Heavens
- Goodness sakes
- Holy Moses
- Holy cow
- Bless your heart
- I promise...anything
- I wish it would stop raining
- My, this heat is oppressive
- You are a fool
- I am sick of driving this bucket of bolts
- My favorite bible verse is when Paul said, ‘I *buffet* my body.’ Yuk, yuk!”

...because according to Westminster, any reference not only to God’s name, but his “titles, attributes, ordinances, the Word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots... his works” and more must be always “treated as holy and reverently used in thought, meditation, speech, writing,” etc.

That means it’s a violation of the 3rd commandment to speak, think or write without absolute reverence about:

1. Any name that is applied to God
2. Any title, like “lord”. So *Lord a' mercy* is out.
3. Any of his attributes – can’t say “holy cow.” Holiness is an attribute of God. You can't speak frivolously about it.
4. Any of his works
5. The weather
6. The Bible – Bible jokes are right out.
7. Anything you enjoy that came from him, such as a car. Complaining is a violation of #3.
8. Anything God made. Therefore you cannot criticize other humans, animals, plants, rocks, mountains and valleys, earthquakes, tsunamis, wasps, ants, roaches, mosquitos, bacteria, COVID-19, or anything in the universe

9. No sinful vows or oaths – you cannot promise anyone anything

The Westminster standards are impossibly high and therefore useless. But they can transform a normal person into a complete asshole when he tries to abide by them.

Part 7 – Lord’s name = his reputation, what he stands for

What seems much more reasonable and in line with the arc of the Bible is that “name” is way of saying “reputation,” not so much the literal name. I take the commandment to be a prohibition of appropriating God’s authority and ultimacy for any human cause or mission.

When Pope Urban II said “Deus vult!” or *God wills it*, in 1095 CE to fire up the people to start the First Crusade, he was in violation of the 3rd Commandment.

God wills it? Really? God wills us in the Church age to go kill? To wage war? So then...*not* turn the other cheek? Okay.

When Nazi’s in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch and Fascists in the Spanish Civil War used the phrase “Dio lo vuole!” they violated the 3rd Commandment.

When the alt-right, white supremacists, and Christian Nationalists use the phrase on their websites and literature today (as reported by Wikipedia) they violate the 3rd Commandment.

And for a more visual and visceral example, this picture is a clear example of appropriating God’s reputation and authority in support of a human cause.



More recent examples:

When Albert Mohler [credited](#) divine intervention when Donald Trump narrowly escaped an assassination attempt in the Summer 2024, I believe Al Mohler broke the 3rd Commandment.

Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Seminary, claims it was “God and God alone” who saved Trump.

As [Peter Wehner put it](#), quoting Mohler, “It was ‘The reality of God’s providence’ that explained why Trump lives. Mohler didn’t say whether ‘God and God alone’ was responsible for the death of Corey Comperatore, who was hit by a stray bullet,” and was killed at the rally.

The same with Franklin Graham when he [said](#) “God spared [Trump’s] life.” And Tucker Carlson, and Steve Bannon, and Kimberly Gilfoyle, and Mike Flynn, and so many others following the assassination attempt. They all claimed it was God's intervention because God wants Trump to be president again.

Sadly, we have a great number of ostensibly Christian leaders in this country who have lost the thread on the 3rd Commandment, and so they are violating it on a regular basis when they appropriate God’s name for their cause.

Appropriating God’s and Jesus Christ’s endorsement for *any* political campaign is wrong, left or right. That's out of bounds for everyone. But it’s especially heinous when it is in the service of a campaign so immoral and shameless as the current Republican campaign.

The same is true for sporting events, but I won’t get into that now.

Part 8 – That time when Jesus cleared the deck on the two things that matter

Jesus simplified everything for us in one quick comment. “Love God and love your neighbor. This is the law and prophets.”

The whole force behind the 3rd Commandment is summarized in “love God.” Not all these backflips invented by the Westminster authors.

Just love God.

Okay Jeffrey, then why did he need to include a somewhat pissed-off-sounding commandment threatening judgment to those who take his name in vain?

You might ask, How do we get from thunderous Moses on Mount Sinai to laid-back Jesus tossing berries in his mouth on the Sabbath?

Context is key. In 1400 BCE, God was taming a wild stallion. The rag-tag, newly-released-from-slavery Jews who were marching from Egypt to inherit the territory of Israel and God promised to Abraham. They needed structure and discipline, obviously. They needed to learn how to relate with this Yahweh person who was delivering them.

God had to be firm in those days.

And even with all the structure God gave them, they *still* had the hardest time keeping their grubby mitts off of golden idols. 1400 years later, in Jesus’ time, the Hebrew people of God are finally stable; at least they were no longer worshipping idols, those days were gone.

They don't need angry commandments to train them like a schoolmaster. Gal 3:24 explains, the law was a tutor, a steward, an escort, to bring the Jewish people to God. So, the law did its job in that respect.

It brought the Jews to God.

Yay.

Now Jesus shows up and explains it all. Don't you get it? The new thing is, it was all about God and humanity being together from the start. Not heavy *rule-keeping for the sake of rule-keeping*.

Ugh. If you're not following me, just give me a call and we can talk further over a beer if needed.

Part 9 – Why am I bringing this up?

One thing I am doing here is, trying to think the best of God. If people just don't like God, it's probably because they've been told *he is angry, full of wrath, has high standards, and demands perfection. In short, he's not someone you would want to be around. He's not your friend.*

But I believe he's probably far better than I can imagine. He's probably the most mature and loving father there ever could be. He doesn't get drunk and beat his wife and kids. He's got a long fuse and doesn't get angry easily. He loves us even when we rage at him. He keeps his promises even when we break ours. He knows just what to say at the right moment. Just as I understand things about my kids that they can't comprehend, God understands things about me.

And as I said at the beginning, he just wants to be with his children. The children need to be well-behaved so they can have the most fun together. That's what all the laws and commandments are about: so that we will love him and love each other. That's the law and the prophets right there.