

Your Questions Answered (part 2)

SCOTT HOEZEE

On *Groundwork*, we always say that we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives, and that is true. When we engage with scripture, we strengthen our faith, but sometimes we also come upon questions and issues that we wonder about and puzzle over; and sometimes you, our *Groundwork* listeners, send your questions to us so that we can address them on the air. In this episode, we are going to review some of the questions that we have received from you, our listeners, this past year. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and as we just said, Dave, we are tackling some of the questions people have sent us via Facebook or through an e-mail, or through a good old regular letter with a stamp on it; the first one coming from a listener named Ramona.

DAVE BAST

It is a reference to Exodus 20:7, which happens to be the third of the Ten Commandments, and it says: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Actually, that verse goes on – or the next one – to say: The Lord will not hold a person without guilt who takes his name in vain; or as I learned it many years ago: Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Ramona asks: Does this verse apply today? There seems to be no repercussions for people doing this. More Christians, even, are using God's name in vain as well, yet no visible discipline. So, I guess her question is: What gives?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is a good question, and it is an honest question. One of the things, I think, we want to get at is both the meaning of Exodus 20:7, which, as you said, Dave, is the third commandment about reverential use of God's name; but also a couple of different ways in which this verse applies, actually, to our lives. Really, the issue of the name of God divides broadly into two categories: One is the one we usually think of most, which is profanity; using the name of Jesus or using just God...

DAVE BAST

Swearing...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Swearing, yes; cussing. That is profanity, but the other area of application here is blasphemy, which is actually probably the main thing the third commandment in Exodus 20 is interested in. They actually overlap, and we will get to that in a minute, so there is some overlap between blasphemy and profanity; but the stronger issue, the far more dangerous issue, is the blasphemy one that we can talk about in a minute. But, it is interesting that this commandment, as you know, Dave, and as probably many of our listeners know, has

caused a lot of consternation in history, including with the Israelites originally, who became so afraid that they would misuse God's name that they chose to never even use it at all.

DAVE BAST

Right. Yes; they stopped pronouncing it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They would not pronounce it. Sometimes today in newspapers or magazines, if a Jewish organization puts out an advertisement for some issue or another, and if they use the word of God, they will spell it G-d.

DAVE BAST

Or a dash.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, a dash, because they still do not dare pronounce or write God's name in any sense for fear that they will accidentally take it in vain, and then not be held guiltless.

DAVE BAST

That certainly is reverence. And you also think of the positive twist to this commandment that Jesus gave in the Lord's Prayer: Hallowed by thy name. The very first petition in the Lord's Prayer urging us to pray that God's name would be kept holy and would not be misused. I think to begin, let's zero in on the commandment itself. What is prohibited is taking the name in vain. What does that mean? In vain, or the word *vanity* is a fairly common Old Testament word, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes, and it refers to lightness or emptiness or futility. Taking God's name in vain – the heart of the commandment – as you said, the most serious abuse of the name of God – blasphemy – is to use God's name in a manipulative way, in an empty way, not intending it for worship and honor, but trying to take advantage of it for some personal means.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is an empty use and empties God's name of its power, too. In the worst-case scenarios of blasphemy, what happens is that the sacred names and the sacred symbols God uses to reveal himself to us get turned upside down; and they get, not only emptied of meaning, they get a new meaning poured into them, which is terrible. A classic example of blasphemy is when the Ku Klux Klan burns a cross on a black person's yard to intimidate them. Now the cross, which is a holy symbol of hope and life, becomes a symbol of hatred and death; and that is inverting – that is turning upside down something good of God – and that is blasphemy. Or, bring God down to your level and you just keep talking about God and you swear by God: I am telling you the truth. By God, you can believe me. And then, of course, you are lying, and now you have brought God down into your sin, and God looks worse in other people's eyes. That is blasphemy.

DAVE BAST

Right. So, twisting holy things for some sinful or selfish or even nefarious purpose would be the ultimate breaking of the third commandment; the ultimate taking of the Lord's name in vain. But then there is the question of profanity; of the more common cursing and swearing, which we have to admit with the coarsening of our society, has become incredibly widespread, and I must confess that it bugs me when you turn on a normal television program and it is, "Oh, my God this, and God that," and even Jesus; just casually throwing around – it is really a sign that these things have lost their sense of sacredness or holiness. But now, the other part of the person's question: Why doesn't God do something about this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or why doesn't the Church do something about it? So, we said earlier that you can distinguish between profanity and blasphemy, and blasphemy is probably more of a concern than profanity; however, it is not an either/or, because as you just said, Dave, one thing that has happened when you take Jesus' name in particular, but even God's name, and you profane it – you use it in a flippant context or as a swear word or as

an expletive – there, too, though, you are emptying those names of their sacred punch. Now they are not reserved for reverent use in worship or prayer only; now they have been brought down to street level and they are common; along with a lot of other words that we will not say on the air, and that cheapens it, too. So, I think, to the question that Ramona asked, certainly where true blasphemy is concerned or where we really feel like people in our church communities are cheapening the things of God through profane language or flippant use of divine symbols – even manipulating the cross or whatever – the Church has to take a stand on that. However the discipline is exercised, too much is at stake for the Church to ignore it.

DAVE BAST

And as for the question: Why doesn't God do something about it? I do not think God sits around with a thunderbolt waiting to zap people, because few of us would go unsinged if he took that approach. Paul says in Romans 2, a very interesting verse: Do you not know that the kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance? So, God has chosen to hold off even judgment on deeply offensive things, by and large to give us space to repent; and the call to all of us should be to follow Jesus' advice in the Sermon on the Mount: Do not swear at all, but let your language be truthful. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. If you have been guilty of this, turn back and find your lead from what Jesus says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is going to have the last word here, too. You think of Philippians 2, that when Christ returns Paul says: Every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. The holiness of God's name will be vindicated by God in the end.

Well, next up we are going to take on a very controversial topic that is a question we frequently get here at *Groundwork*, but I think pastors and leaders are getting questions all over the place along these lines, so we will tackle that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. We are in this listener question program, Dave, and we have a number of questions, and we will try to summarize them, but we frequently do get questions today, as I think most church leaders and religious programs do, relating to issues of homosexuality or sometimes it is referred to now as LGBT issues, and particularly the topic much in the news on gay marriage, as in many places, many states and in many provinces of Canada, the State is recognizing same-sex unions, same-sex marriages; and so our listeners have wondered, where is the Bible on this? What does the Church say on this?

DAVE BAST

Yes, we have had a couple of e-mails about it – one very thoughtful one – I will just quote some of it: The culture is certainly in favor of gay marriage; is the Bible in favor of it? I am very confused and truly do want to know if the Bible is for or against it. Is God for or against it? I am weary of the controversy (so am I, I might add). Maybe you could steer me to a resource that could help me to understand the biblical perspective on this issue, since sadly, it is probably too touchy to be a topic on your show.

Well, we decided it is not too touchy; we are going to try to say something about it even though debates have gone on for years and we have about six-and-one-half minutes left to say what we have to say.

Scott Hoezee:

Yes. I think that one of the things that we can do is we can acknowledge very, very briefly some of the landscape, some of the contours of the larger debate, but then also mention where our own particular traditions here on *Groundwork* from the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America, where they are currently in terms of what does the Bible say; but I think, broadly speaking, and most people probably know this, but this is a spectrum that exists within churches that call themselves Christian churches; all the way from one side that says the Bible speaks clearly and condemns and is against both homosexual

practice, but even the orientation needs to be changed. Someone said, “You need to convert, even from being a gay person,” all the way over to the other side of the spectrum, where people say, “Oh, there is nothing wrong with it at all;” neither the practice of homosexuality, the marriage, being homosexual; they are all created gifts of God and they are to be celebrated; they are just variations on a theme and the Bible – whatever passages in the Bible seem to speak to this are not relevant. In between are ones closer to our Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church, which says: The Bible does have something to say about it. The Bible is against the homosexual practice, but that we love the people who find that they are gay in their orientation. We minister to them; we are pastoral to them. So, the Bible has something to say, but we have people to deal with in a loving way.

DAVE BAST

Right; incidentally, just so I make sure to mention this: If you go to crcna.org or rca.org and filter through those websites, those are our two denominational sites, and there are papers and statements and studies, because our churches have been – our particular denominations have been discussing this and trying to wrestle with biblical teaching for a number of years now; so, that is the online resource that our listener wondered about. We will put those on our website, too; groundworkonline.com.

But, just to get back to the tagline that we use with this program; we talk about digging into scripture as the foundation for our lives; and surely – Scott, I think you would agree – that in our view, scripture clearly affirms a number of things. One is that God’s creation intention for human sexuality and marriage is male and female. That is what Genesis teaches about marriage; that is what Jesus affirms in quoting that passage from Genesis; and that anything less than this is less than God’s intention. You cannot simply redefine marriage if you take the Bible seriously. In my opinion, those who say that the Bible does teach gay marriage as an okay option for Christians, if you can make it say that, you can make it say anything. It no longer makes sense, then, to say the Bible is your foundation for faith and life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think what is important to point out, and I hope helpful for our listeners to point out, is to suggest the level at which the debate is in many of our churches now, not just the Christian Reformed Church or the Reformed Church in America, but in many churches, where the conversation is, and has been for quite a while is, we agree on scripture; we agree with the summary that you just gave, Dave; that the creation norm is male and female, and to have that orientation even is the normal; but, people do not all have that. There are some who are, not by their choosing, have a same-sex attraction. So, the conversation is that we can agree that the Bible says here is the norm, but now pastorally in the church we have people to deal with. Where a lot of people are talking about it is where the really fine writer, Lewis Smedes was starting to go in his thinking before he died 15 or so years ago, and he talked a lot about that similarly we know that scripture is very clear that marriage between man and woman is not supposed to end in divorce, and Jesus was very clear that divorce is way south of God’s created norm, but we have to deal sometimes with the brokenness of our world in our churches with those who get divorced. We find ways to deal with them. We find ways to be pastoral with them. We find ways to even allow for the divorced to be remarried despite some Bible verses that seem to say you just cannot ever do that. The question for the next who knows how many years will be what is a similar line of response toward the gay in our midst – in our churches – even if we agree on what scripture says; what do we do?

DAVE BAST

Right. Well, one thing I think we also agree on, that we know we have to do from scripture is to love one another, whatever and whoever we are. There is no room, in my opinion, in our churches for the kind of rhetoric or behavior that would hold up a sign saying God hates and then fill in the blank with some epithet or some insulting term. God does not hate sinners; God loves sinners. That is what the Bible teaches, which is pretty fortunate for you and me. We are all sinners, and I suspect we are all sexual sinners of one kind or another, especially by Jesus’ standards; and the good news of scripture is God loves sinners and God has a wonderful plan for making us whole eventually; somehow, some way; and here is a great text for you: God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. That is Romans 5:8.

Scott Hoezee:

That is right, and part of me, and maybe with you, too, Dave, and maybe with many of our listeners, insofar as we know that this issue is not going to go away in the next 20 or 25 years, I am probably not going to make it to retirement before my own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, has to deal with this, and I cringe a bit; I cringe not because engaging with the issue is not interesting and important and vital; I cringe because I fear that we will lose our charity for each other; that we will call names, and my prayer is that that will not happen. We have honest wrestling to do, but I hope we do it the way Jesus would have us do it, which we know is in love and compassion.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is a good lead-in to our last question, which is about disagreement and unity, and that is where we will head in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and we are finishing up a second of two listener question programs, Dave, where we are tackling some of the questions that have been sent to us: Facebook, e-mail, mail; and we have one more to do in this program.

DAVE BAST

It comes from Facebook again, and a listener named Evelyn, who asks: Isn't there a scripture that says, "Come let us reason together." I just know too many Christians are in disagreement with one another that it is so discouraging to see; and Evelyn goes on: I want to minister to them and tell them that we have to protect the unity that we have in Christ Jesus. So, how about it, Scott? Is there a scripture that says, "Come let us reason together?"

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is, and many of us have heard this particular verse quoted many times, and usually it is in the context of a congregational meeting that is getting out of hand, perhaps, or there is an argument in the church lobby or in a Bible study group and someone will say, "Well, as the Lord has said, 'Come let us reason together,'" so, in other words, let's not disagree; let's not argue. It comes from Isaiah, from Isaiah 1:18: Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. The NIV, the New International Version, has, "Come now, let us settle the matter." Again, it is a verse that we dig out of that first chapter of Isaiah...

DAVE BAST

Hey, speaking of which, did you know that that was LBJ's favorite verse?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Was it really?

DAVE BAST

Yes, I read somewhere Lyndon Johnson loved to quote Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, let us reason together," only for him, wily politician that he was, it usually meant arm-twisting of some kind or another.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right. We will settle the matter *my* way for the Johnson treatment.

So, that verse is there; so, Evelyn is right, there is a verse that says that. Ironically – and of course, Christian unity – and we will talk about this in just a moment – Christian unity, and our not bickering and biting each other's heads off in the church – of course, that is a major, major goal. Interestingly enough, however, in that particular chapter in Isaiah, Chapter 1, this is God speaking in the context of a very big argument God is having with his people because the Israelites have wandered, and they have gone away, and this is actually a judgment chapter, where God has predicted all kinds of doom and gloom for the Israelites, but then he pauses and says: But, if we can reason together – the full verse says:

18^bThough your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. 20But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” So, it is a call to come back to God and to come back together, but it is in the context of some surprising judgment.

DAVE BAST

Oh, yes. It is a classic text from Isaiah, and it sets the pattern for the whole book. So, the *us* in question is not us – meaning people on the left and people on the right – the *us* is God and his people; and God is saying: Listen; why don’t you listen to my reason? Because here are the options that are set before you: Obedience or disobedience, life or death, blessing or catastrophe. So, in effect, he is saying: Be reasonable and choose life. Turn to me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But that also means, of course, that God does have standards, and that when we in the church argue about the truth of God and being true to God, that is an okay thing to do because God is calling his people back from disobedience to obedience; and sometimes our conversations in the church are like that. I think we have mentioned this before on *Groundwork*, but my friend, Neal Plantinga has noted that if you pay good attention to the New Testament, there seems to be the assumption that there will be a lot of rebuking going on in the Church. It does not usually happen today anymore because we shy away from rebuking because we do not want them to join another church down the street, so we make nice and – in our part of the country, Midwest polite – but the Bible seems to assume that where the truth of God is concerned, we should rebuke each other and do what God is doing in Isaiah 1, and that is call people back to the truth and call people back to obedience; however, that does not mean that we should do that in mean and harsh ways. Christian unity such as we see in John 17 in Jesus’ great prayer: Oh Lord, let them be one as we are One. He wants his followers to be one. That is a big deal, too. The balancing act is standing up for the truth, and yet doing it in love, such that we do not fall apart as a result of the disagreement.

DAVE BAST

There is no problem with vigorous theological and biblical debate in the Church. You just put me in mind of the classic text on the purpose of scripture – 2 Timothy 3:16 – that says it is profitable for teaching, for correction, for rebuke, and training in righteousness. So, it is both moral error and theological or doctrinal error; both positive and negative. You straighten people out and you present the truth. That is what it is all about, and we do not have a monopoly – none of us does, on truth – so we have to engage in this vigorous debate that Evelyn finds distressing at times.

Scott Hoezee:

And it is distressing at times when the vigorous debate results in a split in the church or people leaving or the forming of a whole new denomination. Sometimes these things have been unavoidable in history, but they are always lamentable because there is a sense in which when that happens we have had a failure of loving disputation, loving disagreement, a desire to come together to the truth; something has gone wrong and that is a very lamentable situation because, indeed, we are called to be one in Christ.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture, even as we have done on this show. So, visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics, passages, or questions you would like us to tackle next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/your-questions-answered-part-2>

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