

# THE “H” WORD

## THE “H” WORD

Some words sting. We don't like these words, especially when they're leveled at us. They're offensive. They're fighting words. Throw them our way, and we'll throw something back.

A distinction must be made, though. Wisdom loves distinctions. Let's be wise.

*Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you (Proverbs 9:8).*

Strong words are not always fighting words. Strong words are, at times, driven by love. It's an odd form of love, but we get it. Sometimes we need strong words. It's not pleasant, but it is important. The wise see this, welcome the correction, and love the person courageous enough to bring it.

There's a word, a strong word, which must be considered.

It's a word that stings.

It's a word that's offensive.

It's a word we run from, loathe, and avoid. May it not be said of us. May it not be true. May it not be an accurate reflection of our own reality.

As we consider this word, there is a “must not do” and a “must do” to carry with us.

Must not?

We must not race to apply the word to others.

Must?

We must carefully consider if it applies to us.

That's difficult.

And that's wise.

It's wise because everything...yes everything...is on the line.

Be bold.

Be honest.

Be uncensored.

Let the word soak.

Let the word simmer.

Far too much rides on this to brush it off as not applicable to our *own* lives.

Ready?

## THE “H” WORD

Here goes...

*Hypocrite.*

What an ugly word.

Let it not be true of us. Let it not be an accurate description of our own reality. Let us have integrity. Let us be real. Let us be authentic.

Not us.

No way.

We've known hypocrites. We've worked with them; we've watched them on TV; we've read about them in the news; we've even attempted friendship with a few. Us? No way. We will be true.

But remember the "must do"? And remember the "must not do"? We must not race to apply the word to others. We must wisely consider if it applies to us.

## **RIPE FOR ABUSE**

There are a few areas of life ripe for abuse. They are areas often cheated of truthfulness. Something about these areas beckons dishonesty.

Paying taxes.

Selling goods.

Reporting accomplishments.

And one more...

Loving God.

It bothers us deeply that it's true...but it is true...loving God is one of those areas ripe for abuse, ripe for hypocrisy. It's an area of life often cheated of truthfulness.

Why?

Maybe because lip service comes easy. It's easy to check the God box. Some check it boldly. They fill their lives with activities associated with church or a good cause. They feel good about themselves, because they're clearly distinguished from those who check the box lightly. *"Those are the hypocrites," they think to themselves. "They do just enough to get by. They're not like us. We're committed. We're really into it."*

Danger.

Warning.

Red lights are flashing on the dashboard.

The buzzer is demanding our attention.

Why?

Consider Christ's strongest words. Were his strongest words for those blatantly rebelling against God? Not at all. Christ's strongest words were for those who checked the God box with great fanfare and boldness, the religious leaders of his day.

## **THE "H" WORD**

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are(Matthew 23:15).*

Ouch! Not only does he refer to them as *sons of hell*, but he levels them with the “h” word. “*You hypocrites!*” he says. Lip service and activities are one thing. An authentically devoted heart is another. It’s an old problem. God addressed it early in Scripture’s story.

## TAKE THE NAME

Scripture is often misunderstood. One such misunderstanding involves the third commandment.

*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain (Exodus 20:7,NASB).*

The above is often quoted against using the name “God” as an expression. “*Don’t take God’s name in vain,*” Grandma tells us. Without question, using “God” to curse is against the teaching of Scripture. Nothing said here is meant to advocate speaking the name “God” as an expression of frustration. To do so is careless, offensive, and wrong, and many professing followers of Christ do so without thinking. This needs to stop. With that said, though, inappropriate speaking of the name “God” is not the concern of this commandment. Let’s give it a careful read. What does it mean to “*take the name of the LORD your God in vain*”?

For starters, note that all the letters of LORD are capitalized. This is meant to tip us off. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there are two words we translate Lord: *Adonai* and *Yahweh*. *Adonai* is the general term for Lord. It is used of masters, bosses, and leaders. Translators let us know the Hebrew word underneath the English *Lord* is *Adonai* by using lower case letters: Lord.

*Yahweh* carries much more weight. It is a derivative of God’s description of himself to Moses. When asked his name, God said to Moses, “*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*” (Exodus 3:14). Moses did as God instructed and referred to God as *Yahweh*, a derivative of the Hebrew verb for *I am*. It is a unique name of God himself. And here’s how English Bibles tip us off. *Yahweh* is translated in capital letters: LORD.

It should be noted that the New Testament is in Greek and doesn’t have this same distinction.

Back to the third commandment. We’re to not take the name *Yahweh* in vain.

That helps. There’s more.

What does it mean to “take” a name?

The Hebrew word here is *Nasa*. *Nasa* is translated as take, carry, lift, lift up, bear, or bear up. Contrast this with another Hebrew word: *Amar*. *Amar* is translated to speak, to say. If this command was just about speaking God’s name, we would expect the Hebrew word *Amar*. We don’t get *Amar*. We get *Nasa*.

Consider this...

What does it mean to “lift” a name?

What does it mean to “carry” a name?

What does it mean to “bear” a name?

When we lift a name, when we carry a name, when we bear a name, we take that name as our own. We identify with that name. When we bear a name, we proclaim to the world that we want to be associated with that name. When a bride chooses to take the name of her groom, the action could be described by *Nasa*. She bears the new name.

## THE “H” WORD

Is it coming into focus?

What would God be after by stating, “Don’t carry the name Yahweh in vain”?

Or what might God’s passion be when he says, “Don’t bear the name Yahweh in vain”?

To take a name, to bear a name, to carry a name is to be associated with that name. God’s concern? “*Don’t associate with my name in vain. Don’t claim to carry my name but have it take no effect in your life. Don’t bear my name, carry my name, take my name as your own but in your heart of hearts have no real interest in me.*”

God’s concern?

Hypocrisy.

To carry the name Yahweh in vain is to give lip service but lack a truly dedicated heart.

*The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13).*

Lips say one thing.

Lives reveal another.

Christ put it like this, “*Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*” (Luke 6:46). Or he could have said, “*Why are you taking my name in vain? You say I’m your Lord, but your actions say otherwise.*” It’s no wonder Scripture makes love for God synonymous with obedience. John stated this succinctly:

*This is love for God: to obey his commands (1 John 5:3).*

## **THE MAGIC WAND**

But we hold the magic wand, right? Obedience is good, but it’s not obligatory. We’re saved by grace. The cross covers all that. Wave the magic wand of grace, and we need not worry about hypocrisy. Let’s not get legalistic. Let’s not say obedience is needed. Wouldn’t that contradict the message of the cross? Don’t we say we’re saved by grace and not by works? If we make obedience obligatory, aren’t we compromising grace? Aren’t we saying the cross isn’t really needed?

Not exactly.

Actually, not at all.

The wondrous gift of the cross is the gift of grace and forgiveness for those who want God to be their God. The cross does nothing for those pretending that God is their God while bowing down to another god altogether. Nothing.

The cross is for those wanting to live in God’s presence, but they cannot do so due to the offense of their sin. They see life. Life is found living and walking with God as their God, but they cannot approach this God on their own. On their own, their sin is an offense to this God they genuinely want to know and experience. The cross deals with the offense so they can live and walk and breathe with the God that they love.

But know this...

The cross is useless to those pursuing another god even if they’re pretending God is their God. Their true god, whatever it may be, is accessible through other means. If their god is riches, then riches come through hard work, not the cross. If their god is unbridled sexual expression, then they do not need the cross to get this; they just need to hit the scene.

## **THE “H” WORD**

The person who takes God's name in vain does not need the cross to get to their true god any more than the person on the street needs the door for a building they have no intention of entering. The cross brings awe-inspiring grace and forgiveness for those who want the presence of God in their lives. Scripture puts it like this:

*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).*

Why claim grace, why claim the cross, if you don't truly want to approach the God of that grace? Why flaunt the key to the room you never intend to enter? If you want to run from God, if you want to live apart from his desires, the cross is not needed for that, nor is it available for that. The cross makes available the ongoing presence of God for those who want the ongoing presence of God. It is the most stunning gift available, but it does nothing for those who in their heart of hearts are truly just pretenders.

So what do we do with that? How do we discern ourselves? Clearly, self-deception abounds. The recipients of Christ's strong words were quite certain of their faith. How do we recognize the real thing? Even more, how do we recognize the real thing in us?

Passages of Scripture could be referenced at this point, but a clue is given by stepping back and viewing Scripture's landscape. When we do, we notice something: Scripture abounds with stories. Page after page displays life after life. Many reasons could be given for this. Clearly, one of the most important comes from Christ himself. He explained that "each tree is recognized by its own fruit" (Luke 6:44). In other words, we know what's inside a tree by observing the outside fruit of that tree. Stories display fruit. As God inspired Scripture, he didn't just want to tell us what it means to authentically love him; he painted pictures through stories. Through these stories, we see both authentic and inauthentic love for God put on display. The stories display fruit from lives lived before us. Seeing this fruit helps us discern our own lives as well.

One such story is profound.

## **LITTLE MAN, BIG GOD**

Ever face an insurmountable challenge? Ever have so much to do it just can't be done? Ever feel inadequate and unqualified, but called? There's a thought about God, a saying maybe, that goes something like this...

God never gives you more than you can handle.

If that statement is true, let's be honest, it doesn't feel true. Both Scripture and life display God's habit of positioning us where we are in way over our heads. Clearly, it is not God's intent to design easy lives, soft lives, lives that do not stretch us. There's something about challenges that put our hearts on display. What or who will we turn to? In what will we put our trust? Where will we rest our confidence? Will we cut corners? Will we be faithful?

Will we still love God?

Scripture tells of a time where the army of Israel was in one of those moments. Across the battlefield were the Philistines. We're told the Philistines were on one hill, the Israelites were on another, and a valley rested between them. It was a standoff. They were not physically engaged, but one of them, a Philistine, engaged in a little trash talk.

He wasn't just big. He was enormous. His armor alone weighed 125 pounds.

Goliath was ready to fight. Day after day he taunted the Israelites to send out their best by making an offer simultaneously appealing and appalling. Rather than have the two armies fight, he offered to let the contest be between two men: himself and a warrior of their choosing. No doubt the offer appealed to those wishing to

## **THE "H" WORD**

avoid war. One man risking his life was better than an entire army risking their lives. But what man? What fool would square off with this seasoned and enormous warrior.

No doubt the story is familiar to many, but the details are astounding. Consider Scripture's description of the Israelite's response...

*On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified (1 Samuel 17:11).*

At first pass, this sounds understandable. Of course they were scared. They didn't have a man who could take on a warrior like Goliath. Who wouldn't be scared? Who wouldn't be dismayed? But this misses something terribly important.

We're talking about the Israelites.

The Israelites bear the name of Yahweh, the name they must not carry in vain. This Yahweh, their professed God, had displayed his strength again and again in their nation's history by delivering them from enemies far superior to themselves. He parted the sea when the Egyptians had them cornered. He crumbled the walls of Jericho at the blast of their trumpets. He consistently gave them the ability to defeat armies with greater numbers and greater experience. It was as if God allowed and encouraged positions of weakness so they would need to lean into his great strength.

And now one man taunts them, and they're dismayed and terrified. Why?

Maybe the best explanation comes from Yahweh speaking through an Israelite prophet.

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God (Isaiah 41:10).*

The fruit on the tree was fear and dismay, but this breed of fear and dismay are inconsistent with the kind of tree Israel used to be. At the core of their nation was Yahweh as their God, but fear and dismay displayed love and trust of another god, not love and trust of Yahweh. They may have been carrying the name of Yahweh, but they carried it in vain. Yahweh no longer had their trust. On the outside, they worshipped Yahweh, they carried his name. On the inside, they worshipped their own strength and skills, and their own strength and skills were inferior to Goliath's. Yahweh was not their God.

And then there was David.

Too young to be a warrior himself, he made it to the battlefield only to check on his older brothers. When there, he too heard the taunts of Goliath, and he was stunned. He was stunned not by this man's presence. He was stunned by the offense of Goliath's words.

*David asked the men standing near him,... "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26)*

David was not offended because Goliath denied the physical strength of Israel's army. David was offended by this man defying "*the armies of the living God.*" This was not an offense to the manliness of any Israelite warrior. This was an offense to his God. David's response, the fruit on his tree, revealed the God of his heart. This was a no brainer to David. On one side, there was Goliath. On the other side, there was Yahweh, the Creator of all things.

David did not carry Yahweh's name in vain.

David's passion and confidence was put on even greater display when he himself squared off with Goliath. Goliath laughed when young David stepped onto the battlefield and only intensified his taunting, "*Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?*" Unmoved, David makes known to Goliath and to all those watching, the true source of his great confidence.

## THE "H" WORD

*You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied (1 Samuel 17:45).*

What a statement! Did you catch his exact words? Do you see the capitalized LORD? He does not carry this name in vain. Rather, he comes against Goliath, “in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel.” It’s as if he’s saying, “My God’s bigger than your god.” Goliath worshipped his sword, spear, and javelin. David worshipped Yahweh. In David’s mind, this was no contest, and the moments that followed would prove him right. Goliath fell and fell hard. Through David, Yahweh displayed his great power and strength once again.

## **LEGALISM AND LICENSE**

It’s time to get practical. It’s time to get focused. With all that we’ve read as backdrop, let’s bring hypocrisy its greatest threat. Hypocrisy is deception. Let’s bring clarity. Hypocrisy loathes clarity.

Broadly speaking, hypocrisy comes in two stripes. Understanding these two categories of hypocrisy will carry us into our exercise.

First, there’s the legalist. The legalists are those of us who know the trappings of faith, but at our core, are still trusting in something other than God. Commonly, we put our trust in ourselves. This is those of us who look to our own strength rather than the strength of God. We may attend church, but church attendance is a point of pride rather than gathering with others to lean into God for strength and guidance. We may know and read the Bible, but as with church attendance, knowing Scripture inflates our ego rather than feeding our souls. We may even support the church financially, at times with large checks; but when considered honestly, these gifts to the church are not expressions of gratitude to the God we need for all things, but expressions of pride as it seems God and his church need us. Yes, we take the name of the Lord, but we do so in vain because it is only external. Internally, we trust in and look to something or someone other than God. Christ challenged the legalist with this:

*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean (Matthew 23:27).*

Second, there’s the licentious, a common form of hypocrisy in our day. The licentious are those of us who view grace as a license to do what we really want to do: disobey God. It’s rarely stated blatantly. More commonly, we state it with an air of humility. Struggle with sin is thought to be a badge of authenticity. To overcome sin would compromise this authenticity, so rather than appear plastic, we revel in our sin. Reveling in sin is viewed as a deeper understanding of grace, and those who challenge this understanding are viewed as legalists. Grace no longer moves us away from sin, as grace is intended, but gives us the ability to sin, even if we pretend we don’t like it. The licentious take the name of the Lord, but they miss the point of grace, and therefore take his name in vain. Grace is no license to run from God. Grace opens the door to be close to God. Jude challenged the licentious with this:

*For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude 1:4).*

Which leads to a question.

## **THE QUESTION**

It’s our closing question. With it, though, we will not do what hypocrisy loves to do. Hypocrisy notes insights with interest but simply turns the page and leaves the insights behind. With increased clarity on hypocrisy, this

### **THE “H” WORD**

question will carry us into an exercise. Is the exercise hypocrisy proof? Unfortunately, it is not. Hypocrisy can weasel its way through the best of exercises. But the question, when considered carefully, leads us to the only true remedy for hypocrisy, God himself, so not only will the question highlight hypocrisy, but it will provide hope for us as well.

The question is this...

Who is your God?

Do you claim God while trusting in yourself (the legalist)? Do you claim God while *not* trusting his commandments (the licentious)? This question, when carefully and prayerfully considered, not only addresses hypocrisy, but also leads us to our point of hope. It is both ironic and tragic that we attempt to slay our hypocrisy with our own strength. Liberation happens when we come against this Goliath in the strength of our God.

The exercise that follows guides us toward this very end.