

Matthew 6:9
July 12, 2009

Hampton Baptist
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Sermon Series on The Lord's Prayer

"What's in a Name?"

What's in a name? As I was growing up, I was taught that I always *had* something if I maintained a good name. Pretty good advice. Ethical behavior is a goal that outlasts even wealth; having a good name for oneself is important. A goal of ours should be that our names be honored or respected.

Remember Leonard Slye? Few people did, until he changed his name to Roy Rogers, an important first step in becoming a motion picture star. How about Marion Morrison? A little feminine for a he-man cowboy, so he changed it to John Wayne. Or Issur Danielovitch? First changed to Isadore Demsky and then to Kirk Douglas. Common law grants you the right to adopt any name you want as long as you're not trying to defraud or be deceptive. So don't change your name to McDonald and open up a hamburger stand. Also, if you're a politician, don't bother to change your name to "None of the Above." Luther D. Knox, a candidate in a Louisiana gubernatorial primary, had his name legally changed to just that. However, a federal judge had Mr. None of the Above's name taken off the ballot, because the move was deceptive. (Al Ries and Jack Trout, Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind, New York, New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1982)

At first, descriptive names were confined to a single virtue: Faith, Hope, Love, Charity, Increase, Continent, and the like. But within a generation, Puritan parents were giving their children names that positively rang with righteousness: Flie-Fornication, Job-Raked-Out-of-the-Ashes, Small-Hope, Praise-God, Fear-Not, The-Lord-Is-Near. Names began to sound rather like cheerleaders' chants, so that among the early Pilgrims we find Fight-the-Good-Fight-of-Faith Wilson, Be-Courteous Cole, Kill-Sin Pemble, and the memorably melodic Safely-on-High Snat. And sometimes parents simply closed their eyes and stabbed blindly at the Bible, placing all their faith in the wisdom of Providence, which accounts for the occasional occurrence of such relative mindlessness as Maybe Barnes and Notwithstanding Griswold. (Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, p. 94. Cited in Bill Bryson, *Made in America*, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994, p. 115.)

I must confess that in my own family, names of some of my relatives have brought many a chuckle, like Octavia Haseltine Nash, we just called her Aunt Tavie; Uncle Euqued; Uncle Ruel; even my grandmother was named Minnie Vela Nash. Naming our children was one of the most *awing* tasks of my life. We wanted their names to *mean* something. Knowing that their names would last them a lifetime was humbling to us. We realized that often we *become* our name. Have you ever heard someone say, "She looks like a Kimberly," or "He doesn't look like a David?"

During biblical times, names also had meaning. We can think of individuals whose names were changed because of what would happen to them or because of their character. Abram became Abraham; Jacob became Israel; Simon became Peter; Saul became Paul. God changed their names.

So what about our New Testament Lesson for the morning? What about *God's* name? In Exodus, God spoke to Moses through a burning bush calling him to be the delivering agent for the Children of Israel who were in Egyptian slavery. Moses asked God, "You want me to tell the sons of Israel that the God of their fathers has sent me to them. What shall I say to them when they ask what your name is?"

God's name was then revealed, "I AM WHO I AM. You shall tell them I AM has sent you." The inner meaning of "I AM," the Hebrew word pronounced "Yahweh," emphasizes God's dynamic and active self-existence. But actually, the most devout Jews would never even *breathe* the word "Yahweh." They thought it was too sacred to even call God by name. One of the Ten Commandments was not to take the Lord's name in vain; some of the most devout Jews took the commandment so *literally* that they *never* used the word "Yahweh." Instead they would use the Hebrew word for

“Lord.” By the way, in your Bibles, if all the letters in the word LORD are capitalized, then the Hebrew word “Yahweh” was used; if all the letters are not capitalized then the Hebrew word for “Lord” was used. The word “Jehovah” is actually a German rendition of the Hebrew word “Yahweh.” There were no vowels in Hebrew, therefore the letters were simply YHWH, so when the German translators saw these letters, the Y was pronounced as a J sound and the W as a V. The English language has adapted to the German “Jehovah” rather than the Hebrew “Yahweh.”

So God's name was to be revered or hallowed. The word “hallowed” literally means “to treat as holy” or “to honor.” So another rendition would be “Let God's name be treated differently from all other names,” or “Let God's name be given a position that is absolutely unique.”

Taking the phrase at face value, one truly needs to *value* the name of God. Our society certainly misses the mark here; the word God is used in anger, in surprise, and in doubt. God's name is hardly given any level of prominence today, and sadly to say, that is the case among Christians as well. We are to set the pace at work, school, or in the community. If Christians do not *hallow* God's name, then how do we expect non-Christians to do so?

In actuality, God cannot be *limited* to a name. Sometimes we limit God with our words. God is more vast and more powerful than any language can describe. “Oh unnameable One” could be appropriate, but it certainly sounds impersonal doesn't it?

The Ten Commandments warn against creating graven images or idols as gods, and sometimes our names for God fall prey to this sin. When we say that God has to be *this* and cannot be *that*, then we have *limited* God. When we are adamant that God can only be a father and not be a mother, then we have limited God. God is neither he nor she, therefore God is neither all father nor all mother.

Our understanding of God is certainly tainted by our culture also. Dorothy Patterson, wife of a seminary president and editor of a Woman's Study Bible said, “God is neither male nor female. *He's* God.” Without thought, her cultural bias even contradicted her own statement.

God is both/and not either/or. There is so much about God that we will never understand; that is what makes God, God. Someone has said, “Any God that I can *completely* understand is not worth knowing.” Wow . . . I have to agree with that. If I can completely understand who God is, why God does this or that, when God will offer _____, then I have become equal with God . . . or I have no need for God . . . or I have become a god myself. God is above all we can ever imagine.

But a studious look at the phrase *Hallowed be thy name* reveals an even greater truth. The word *name* actually means *nature*, not as in the environment, but as in character. God's name is synonymous with God's nature. The Psalmist (Psalm 9:10) wrote “Those who know thy name put their trust in thee.” Quite clearly, there are many who are familiar with God in concept, but certainly do not *know* God. God's nature has been manifested to us through the created world, through our consciences, through the Bible, but primarily through the example of Jesus. We need to reverence God in all the ways that God is revealed.

So when we pray “Hallowed be Thy Name,” we actually are saying “enable us to give to you the unique place which your nature and character deserve and demand.” We are praying for God to help us not have any other gods. We are praying for help in making God first in our lives. This becomes a conscious choice, one which comes with intentionality. Making God first sometimes creates conflict which could be costly.

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Church History is replete with examples of individuals who have become martyrs, because they deliberately chose to make God first in their lives. "Some folks take their faith seriously enough to protect it even when it is being misused. Anne Hutchinson was one of those people. Anne grew up in the home of a minister in the Church of England. When her father disagreed with the church, he said so, even though it meant he was put into prison. Naturally, Anne grew up believing that faith was something a person took seriously regardless of the consequences.

"As a young woman with a successful husband and many children, Anne left the Church of England. She continued to search for truth and studied the King James Version of the Bible, which was published in 1611 shortly after she was married. As she examined various Christian teachings, Anne was particularly influenced by the idea that a believer ought to be more concerned about obeying the *Spirit* than a set of rules. Obeying the *law* did not prove you were good, she concluded.

"Seeking the religious tolerance she could not find in England, Anne with her husband William and her children, sailed to America where she bore her fifteenth child. Settling in Boston across the street from Governor John Winthrop, Anne opened her home to women who wanted to discuss biblical matters. Puritanism or Congregationalism was the state-supported church of the colony of Massachusetts. Laws mandated attendance at the public worship services of the church, levied taxes on all citizens to pay ministers' salaries, and penalized religious dissenters who sought to practice or proselytize their faiths.

The religious leaders were not happy with Anne's activities. Her protests against the legalism of the church were considered very dangerous doctrine. The disturbed ministers paid a visit to Anne but were unable to stop her activities. They condemned her as a mere woman who believed in the guidance of the Spirit. Fearing she would lead others to defy the Puritan laws, Anne was tried in 1637. Her neighbor, Governor Winthrop announced her sentence: she would be banished from the colony, because she was an unfit woman.

"After her imprisonment, Anne and her family continued to be harassed for their beliefs. William and Anne moved their large family to Rhode Island. Although Rhode Island provided legal refuge as a safe haven for those embracing church-state separation, the harassment from Boston continued to reach Anne. To place more distance between her family and her enemies, they moved to New York where they were killed in their home by Indians.

"A religious misfit in England, a religious threat in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a religious teacher in her community, and an example of Christian integrity, Anne Hutchinson modeled a serious faith regardless of the cost. As she said, "The Lord judgeth not as man judgeth. Better to be cast out of the church, than to deny Christ." (C. Douglas Weaver. *A Cloud of Witnesses*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing. 1993. p. 89-90)

Making God first sometimes creates conflict which could be costly. So what's in a name? Christian integrity and ethical behavior combine in making the clause *Hallowed be Thy Name* more than a catch phrase. As we pray *The Lord's Prayer* each Sunday and on other occasions, may we realize for what we are praying, namely this "God, enable us to give to you the unique place which your nature and character deserve and demand." What's in a name? In God's name, in God's nature, we should place our unequivocal devotion and commitment. O God, hallowed be thy name.