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This way forward

STEWARDSHIP THROUGH THE LORD'S PRAYER:

THE FIRST MILLION

Psalm 100; Ezekiel 36:22-36

October 30, 2016

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Sports Illustrated columnist Ivan Maisel wrote, College football has a way of making no-names memorable. At Auburn, mention David Langner and men will take off their hats and place them over their hearts. A quarter century ago Langner returned two blocked punts for touchdowns in the fourth quarter, leading the Tigers to a 17-16 upset of undefeated, No. 2-ranked Alabama. Southern Cal fans revere Doyle Nave, the fourth-string quarterback who led the Trojans to the winning touchdown in the 1939 Rose Bowl. Against a Duke defense that hadn't allowed a point all season...

In sports there is a fervency, almost a reverence, for certain heroic acts that enshrine favorite teams in football lore of years past. Mention the name and hushed tones emerge as *the catch, the return, or the block* are recounted for the thousandth time, with no sense of weariness at the telling. A few years ago, I heard Perry Tuttle speak, some 30 years after Clemson's National Championship run, and you could feel almost a sense of awe in the room.

But there is one name that is so holy, that it won't be spoken by some. Instead, they say, "*ha-shem*" which means 'the name', or simply *Adonai* which means Lord. God's name, *Yahweh*, was a sacred gift given to Moses on Mount Sinai along with very clear instructions not to abuse it, as in "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord in vain!"

During Jesus time, the Lord's name had taken a beating. The subjugation of God's people smeared the reputation of the All-powerful Lord. If God was so powerful, then how could the chosen people be conquered? In fact, they were not only conquered by the Romans but, over the centuries, the Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Greeks all took a turn. In other words, Israel was on a centuries' long losing streak. The prophets felt this sting and through Ezekiel God declared, "I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them."

Businesses and non-profits conduct conferences to help organizations keep their reputation spotless. Some things that degrade an organization's reputation are:

wastefulness, exclusiveness, and deceitfulness. Attributes that help are: inspiring, professional, trustworthy, and approachable. In today's world, people and companies use lawyers to protect their reputation, suing for libel or issuing cease and desist orders, but God takes a different approach. God calls us to be stewards of the divine name. When Jesus taught us to pray, "Hallowed be your name," he was charging us with this sacred task.

But this does not mean seeking to issue gag orders on foolish televangelists, but living lives that give glory to God.

We spend a lot of time relying on God. The warmth of the sun, the fertility of the earth, the treasure of family and friends all come from God. You know your children have become adults when they come to you and, instead of asking for the car keys or spending money, they ask, "How are you doing?" When was the last time you asked God, "How are you doing?" As we mature in Christ, our concerns turn past ourselves and onto others, but also to God.

Ezekiel and Jesus show us that God cares about the divine name. And so we should spend time considering how we live out the prayer Jesus taught, how we can help God's name to be seen as holy throughout the earth.

To understand this task, we have to first understand the nature of holiness. Our modern concept of holiness is too wrapped up in images of serene prayer recited in ornate sanctuaries.

A wonderful exposition comes to us from PT Forsyth, a 19th century Scottish theologian. His work teaches us that, "Holiness is a moral power which constitutes and directs all being." (*Hallowed Be Thy Name: The Sanctification of All in the Soteriology of P. T. Forsyth*, Goroncy)

This means holiness is not a polite, quiet virtue but righteous action and passion in places of injustice or moral weakness.

But this righteousness is not blind devotion to a list of moral dos and don'ts that we teach our children. Don't lie, don't covet, etc. It is not something we do

simply because an authority greater than self has commanded it. Forsythe goes further in explaining that, “God’s holiness is the outward movement of God’s love in the economy.” (Ibid.)

Our holiness is nothing less than God’s love within us, driving us to act in the world. Forsyth sums it up well, “Unless there is within us that which is above us, we shall soon yield to that which is about us.”

The most perfect example we have of love-in-action is, of course, Jesus himself. Christ hallowed God’s name so well that we understand him to be God’s very self. Jesus’ love was characterized not so much by feelings, though we are told he had compassion, but by sacrificial action. He sacrificed his quiet time when he healed incessantly; he sacrificed his reputation when he ate with sinners; he sacrificed security when he wandered from town to town; he sacrificed his life when he died on the cross.

We hallow God’s name when we act in sacrificial love. It is a rather gargantuan and daunting task. Think for a moment of the great criticism of the church and of Christians in general – hypocrisy. Many are turned away from the church because our actions do not reflect our beliefs. Sadly, the critique is accurate. I don’t imagine there are any people in this room who believe their actions line up perfectly with their beliefs. So we are hypocrites. We know it and our hypocrisy degrades God’s name in the world. We have prayed this phrase for so long and we feel so unworthy of the task that we, perhaps, have abandoned it altogether. Yet, Jesus teaches this prayer.

He wants us to bring glory to the name of God. But he knows we will fail, so he gives us a path that we can all follow, a way in which no matter how frail or feeble our faith, we can be a part.

He makes it simple for us, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Your task is not to be perfect, but to use whatever light that God has put inside of you to share that love of Jesus Christ. And your light may feel a little dim at times. But that’s why we come together as a church, because if my light is added to your light, suddenly there is a glow, there is a blaze that blinds the world with the love of Christ!

And that’s why we do Stewardship. Because if we give our gifts, that may help somebody else find their light of healing or someone to find their light of feeding the hungry or helping to build a home. Whatever your light is, we can unlock it when we work as one people of God.

Everyone has a light, whether you are old, young, or in-between! It does not matter. Just ask six-year-old Jonah Pournazarian.

One morning his friend, Dylan Siegal, saw him take his shoe off and prick it. He told Dylan he was sick and might die. Dylan wanted to help and so his mother suggested a bake sale or a lemonade stand. Dylan thought that idea sounded crazy. Later that night he decided what he wanted to do and told his mom, “I am going to write a book.” Not I want to write a book, but I *am* going to write a book. Only a six-year-old could have such confidence.

The next day he got to work. He decided that the book would be called *Chocolate Bar* – apparently, to a six-year-old, “Chocolate Bar” means “awesome”. And so something “*chocolate bar*” would be on each page – a trip to Disneyland, going to the beach, playing with friends.

Dylan begged his parents to print it so that he could start selling it. Well, perhaps his parents, like most, encouraged their son on the outside, while on the inside thinking that this was a crazy idea, but if we don’t print the book we are never going to hear the end of it. So the parents printed the book and soon there was an opportunity to sell some of these. With that first sale they made \$5,000! All because a kid decided to sit down and write a book.

But that wasn’t the end of it; this light had not finished shining. At the next PTA event, there was the opportunity to sell more books. At this point they had raised \$25,000! That’s “chocolate bar”, isn’t it? One parent asked Dylan, “How much do you want to raise?” Without missing a beat, he responded, “A million dollars.” That’s crazy, isn’t it?

But everybody set to work and soon the book *Chocolate Bar* was finding itself on beside tables of children with the same rare cancer of the liver as Jonah. And it was giving them hope and strength to do what they needed to do to stay healthy. And after lots of

PTA's, bazaars, and other events, just two years later, Dylan hit his goal of \$1,000,000.

The actions that we take may or may not lead to a cure for cancer. But when people see our actions they will look and they will know that there is love in this world; that there is goodness and kindness in the hearts of people – of the old and the young and even a six-year-old child.

And when they see those acts of love and of kindness and of goodness, they will look to the heavens and say, "Glory to God."

Amen.