

Preacher: Ruth Preston Schilk

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Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17, especially verse 17

Sermon: *What's in a Name?*

Ruthie. Ruthie Toothy. Rutie Toot Toot. These are a few of the variations of my name that I was called by my family and a few other special people during my childhood. I didn't mind really, for I knew they were terms of endearment, lovingly teasing, and affectionate.

For quite a while, however, I was **not** so fond, of the *second* name that my parents had given me. No one else that I knew had that name. It seemed strange. I felt odd being identified with it and identified by it.

Occasionally I wished that I could have a different middle name, like *Nancy*, the name of a girl I admired in the grade ahead of me.

Now I consider my name unique, and instead of feeling odd, I feel special, loved, and honoured. My second name is Ne Tannis, Cree for *Little Daughter*. Once more, this name also indicates my parents' endearing love for me.

Last names also are important identifiers, particularly for people *outside* the family circle. A variation in spelling might indicate that a family was from another region, or that in their travels, their surname had become mis-spelled or changed for convenience or safety reasons.

Sometimes, nationality, ethnicity, or tribe-grouping are often indicated by the family name. Occasionally, so is **reputation**. Consider the Hatfields and the McCoys of the United States, and Canada's Black Donnellys. When I visited the Scottish Borders near Hawick, and asked about the Scotts, *my* ancestors, I was shocked to learn that the Scotts were known as cattle rustlers!

Names tell us a lot about what once *was*, even though we may not **live** in “the old country” where our name may have originated. Names also lay bare earnest hopes for the future -- as we labour over choosing the perfect name whose meaning we hope our new-born will live into.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that names and their importance have universal and timeless significance. This significance applies likewise to names found in the **Bible**. In Genesis 11:4, we read that in addition to building a tower, “the tower of Babel,” **a name** was a way of gathering or grouping people together:

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

Names in scripture frequently describe a person's essence or experience. Abram's name which means *exalted ancestor* was changed by the LORD to “Abraham” which means, *ancestor of a multitude* (Genesis 17:5). God's plan was that Abraham would “live into” the meaning of his name.

God the Father also has a name. When Moses turned aside to look at the bush that burned but wasn't burnt-up, part of that very first conversation between God and Moses was about God's name. Moses asked:

If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them? (Exodus 3:13)

God replied to Moses: *I AM WHO I AM*, and *You shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors...has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations....”* (Exodus 3:14,15).

I AM is an unusual name. But as I've said on other occasions, one could **never, ever** say all that God *is*. That would be too limiting, for God is limitless and far **more** than all of the words we could think of to complete a sentence describing God that begins with "I AM..." One scholar helps us understand this even further with these thoughts:

The name is not merely a designation, but is the expression of the sum total of the divine Being...the formula in which all his attributes and characteristics are summed up. It is equivalent to his person. The finite mind can deal with him only through his name; but his name [cannot be] detached from his nature [M.R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, (Wilmington, Del.: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1972), notes on Matthew 28:19]

Having a name makes even **God** knowable and personal. God is so "personal," that he came to us "in person" through his Son Jesus – to a specific place and for a specific time. Is it any wonder then, that Jesus, the very Son of God, received from his heavenly Father a Name which is supreme over all (Acts 4:12; Philippians 2:9; Hebrews 1:4)? Is it any surprise that "the name of Jesus [a Greek derivative of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning "Yahweh is my salvation"]...embraces the whole content of the saving acts revealed in Jesus" [Ernest D. Martin, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, Waterloo: Herald Press, 1993), p. 177]?

The name of Jesus also belongs to the body of Christ and resides within the community that calls itself the church, His body. In effect, **we** have been named after Jesus and are to be like him and all that his name means. The writer of the letter to the Colossians summarizes specific behaviour of believers and of the fellowship of believers, simply, yet powerfully when he writes, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17). In other words, whatever you do, do it "in the authority of, in the character of, and in the presence and power of" [Martin, p. 177] the Lord Jesus.

What does this mean for Christian individuals and congregations?
It means several things:

1) Doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus means that there is no division between so-called ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ work. Our relationship with Jesus embraces and controls the **whole** of life, not just during Sunday School and worship, not merely when in the public eye – but also from Monday to Saturday, at school, in the plant, in the grocery store, when we sharing the road, and when we’re privately using our computers.

2) The general admonition to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus means that there is not a **detailed** code of rules for Christians for each situation we encounter. Rather we can ask ourselves **general** questions to help determine our response, questions like:

“What is the Christian thing to do here?

Can I do this without compromising my Christian confession?

Can I do it ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’ – whose reputation is at stake in my conduct?

Can I thank God the Father through him for the opportunity of doing this thing?” [F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the*

Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 160].

“Can we do it, calling upon the name of Jesus, asking for his help?

Can we speak it and in the same breath name the name of Jesus?

Can we speak it, remembering that he will hear?” [William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: the Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, rev. ed., (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 160]

These guiding questions may be especially important--but not limited to--people who are young in the faith, those who haven’t yet developed the spiritual reflexes that enable them to automatically say and do as Jesus would. Even so, Christians solid in their faith would *also* benefit from holding what they say and do up to the purifying light of these questions – and then answering honestly.

3) Doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus means that we

will find ourselves in the company of non-Christians who also display compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love. “Believers do not have a lock on virtuous conduct” [Michael Barram, *Colossians 3:1-17: “Raised With Christ,”* in *Interpretation* 59, No. 2, Apr., 2005, pp. 188-190]. In such cases, what *does* set our behaviour apart from others is *why* we live the way we do. Our reference point is the risen and living Lord Jesus. “If, we have been raised with Christ” (Colossians 3:1), nothing earthly can adequately serve as a basis for our conduct (Col. 3:2). If and when we are asked *why* we do or say what we do, we have been given the perfect opportunity to talk about who we are named after and that our “resurrection behaviour is patterned on our resurrected Name-sake.”

Ours is quite the responsibility, but please don’t become so overwhelmed by the responsibility of The Name that you say and do **nothing**. Please, gladly wear, and speak, and live the Name that is above all names. We may **occasionally** need reminders of Whose we are and who better to support us than the rest of the body of Christ who also struggle to increasingly reflect the reality that already defines us. May we gladly, and thankfully help one another.

Let us pray:

How wonderful, that you have named your Son, Jesus,
“for he will save us from our sins.”

We thank you with our imaginations, thoughts, and lives
that are turned around toward you.

We long for that day when at his name,
every knee should bend in adoration and worship
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and **every** tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Use us to help that day come closer.
To your glory we pray. Amen.