

God's Holy Name

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:7;
Matthew 5 :33-37; 6:1-6; 7:21-23; 21:28-32;
Mark 7:5-8*

The third Commandment states, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." The basic principle embodied here is the majesty and holiness of the name of God. Because of its holy character, God's name must always be used with the utmost sincerity and reverence.

I. The Name of God

In our western culture there is a tendency to take an indifferent attitude toward names. "What's in a name?" we ask. Shakespeare has Juliet offer the familiar comment, "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet" (Romeo and Juliet, II. 2).

Every parent has enjoyed choosing a name for his new offspring. What determines the choice? Occasionally a name is chosen because its meaning seems appropriate to the nature of the child or to the circumstances of his birth. But often it is simply a matter of aesthetic appeal: a certain name just sounds masculine, or daintily feminine, or cute. Often parents name their child after a friend or relative or after a Bible person.

In other words, we seldom make a direct connection between someone's name and his character.

The importance of Names

This was not the case in Biblical times, when the concept of *name* was much more significant than now. In Bible days a person's name was meant to express his very essence or character. For instance, the name *Benjamin* means "son of my right hand," which exactly expressed the relationship between Jacob and his youngest son. The names *Joshua* and *Jesus* mean "salvation of the Lord," which succinctly sums up the mission and accomplishment of each.

The seriousness of one's name was shown particularly when the Lord changed the names of certain people. Their new names reflected more clearly their role and destiny in God's plan. For instance, God changed *Abram* (exalted father) to *Abraham* (father of a multitude) (Genesis 17:5).

This intimate relation between a person's name and the person himself made the use of the name a matter of great importance. A disrespectful use of a man's name indicated disrespect for the man himself.

God's Name and Nature

The Biblical attitude toward the name of God is no exception to the above. His name is holy and must be revered. "Holy and reverend is his name," says Psalm 111:9. Jesus began the model prayer with the words, "Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name" (Matthew 6:9, ASV). Jesus was saying, "Let Your name be acknowledged as holy and treated reverently."

Why should this be? Because God's name stands for the very person of God himself. As G. D. Boardman says, the name of God "signifies his nature, his attributes, his character, his authority, his purposes, his methods, his providences, his words, his institutions, his truths, his kingdom; in short, all that God is, all that God says, all that God does, all that God bids" (*The Ten Commandments*; Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1946 reprint, p. 85).

This intimate relation between God's name and nature is especially clear on several occasions. In Exodus 34:5-7, when the Lord graciously proclaims His name before Moses, this includes a proclamation of His basic nature and attributes. When a special divine messenger, an angel of the Lord, was sent to guide the Israelites through the wilderness, the Lord established his divine authority by announcing that "my name is in him" (Exodus 23:20, 21).

The Name of Jesus

The New Testament makes it clear that "the name of the Lord thy God" includes the name of each of the three persons of the triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus commanded His followers to baptize people "into the name [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, ASV). The divine name embraces all three.

The significance and holiness of the name of Jesus is especially emphasized. The disciples performed miracles through the power of Jesus' name (Luke 10:17; Acts 3:16; 4:10; 16:18). Remission of sins, salvation, and eternal life are given through Jesus' name (Acts 10:43; John 20:31; Acts 4:12). We must believe on the name of Jesus (John 2:23; 3:18; 1 John 3:23) and be baptized in His name (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).

The name of Jesus is the most exalted of all and demands the highest reverence and respect. Following Jesus' humiliation in death,

God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, . . . and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11, ASV).

The third Commandment applies with full force to the name of Jesus.

The Basic Meaning

In view of the importance of God's name, we see why we are commanded not to use it in vain. This means basically that we must not use it in a thoughtless, empty, irreverent, or hypocritical way.

II. Profanity

The most obvious application of this Commandment to Christian behavior is its prohibition of profanity or cursing, which is a kind of blasphemy.

To profane something means to take that which is uncommon, exalted, and holy, and to drag it down to the level of the common, ordinary, and impure. Thus we profane God's holy name when we use it simply as an expletive or swearword, to give vent to our anger, or to express strong feelings about something.

Profane Expressions

What kinds of expressions are prohibited as a profane use of God's name? The first to be mentioned (and they are listed here with reverence and trembling) are hard oaths such as "Good God!" or "By God!" or "My God!" or "God damn!" Or simply "God!" To utter such expressions as deliberate profanity is the height of blasphemy.

But these are not the only expressions forbidden here. There are other somewhat "softer" oaths that are used even by the more pious but that are still a profaning of God's name. These include "I'll swear to God!" and "Great God Almighty!" and "Lord God!"

Even the expressions "Thank God!" and "God knows!" and "So help me God!" and "God bless America!" are vain and sinful if used in a careless, offhand way. Occasionally we hear someone lose his temper and begin to swear, "God "; but then he catches himself and completes the oath with the words, "bless America!" He thinks he has avoided the blasphemy, but his reckless disregard for the holiness of God's name has already manifested itself.

Since Jesus is our Lord and our God (John 20:28), and since His name is above every name (Philippians 2:9), then it is likewise blasphemous to use His name simply as a swearword. The person who carelessly says "For Christ's sake!" or "Jesus Christ!" is just as guilty as the one who says "God damn it!"

Many people, including many sincere Christians, profane the name of God by a thoughtless use of the word *Lord*. How often do we hear a sweet Christian lady carelessly say "Lord have mercy!" or "O Lord!" or just "Lord!" (Sometimes in the vernacular it becomes "Lordy!")

But is "Good Lord!" any less a profanity than "Good God"? He who is our God is our Lord also (see again John 20:28). When the average person hears the word *Lord*, of whom does he immediately think? Definitely not of an English nobleman, but rather of "the Lord our God." Hence we must use the word *Lord* with sincerity and reverence.

What about *damn* and *hell* when used simply as common swearwords? These too are profanity and are forbidden by this Commandment. Both expressions refer to something that is the exclusive prerogative of God, namely, eternal judgment; therefore any use of these terms brings God into the picture by implication. A light and flippant use of *damn* or *hell* is a mockery of God's judgment, and is thus a mockery of the power and person of God.

The Seriousness of Profanity

Profaning the name of God is a serious sin. The third Commandment specifies that "the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). Those who do so join the ranks of the enemies of God (Psalm 139:20).

The penalty prescribed by God for this sin shows its seriousness. Under the Old Testament law the punishment was death. Leviticus 24:10-23 gives the account of a young man who was overheard blaspheming the Lord's name. He was brought to Moses, and the Lord instructed Moses to have the man stoned to death: "And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him" (Leviticus 24:16).

There is an indication in the New Testament that Christians blasphemed were excommunicated from the church. In 1 Timothy 1:20 Paul refers to two men, Hymeneus and Alexander, "whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme." To "deliver unto Satan" means to excommunicate or to exclude from the fellowship of the church (1 Corinthians 5:5). It is the most serious penalty the church itself can inflict on its erring members.

Why is profanity or blasphemy such a serious sin? A person may be in the habit of using

a term for God (e.g., *God, Christ, or Lord*) as a common expletive. "What's wrong with it?" he asks. "I don't mean anything by it." But that is just the point! The name of God is holy, and we are to use it only when we mean something by it. To use it in a meaningless or thoughtless way is an insult to God.

III. Hypocrisy

We may take God's name in vain in other ways besides thoughtless, blasphemous speech. We need not speak another person's name in order to use it. For instance, we may use another's name by taking it unto ourselves and wearing it or becoming associated with it in some way. A wife does this when she takes on the surname of her husband. This is also what a Christian does: he takes to himself the name of Christ his Lord.

When we are thus associated with a certain name, everything we do reflects upon it for good or for bad. In order to be true to that name, our whole life must be consistent with its reputation and character.

To use an example from the realm of fiction, the name *Walton* has become associated with all things pure and wholesome as a result of the television series about "The Waltons." But what if it were discovered that John-Boy Walton had become a dope peddler and a wino? Would that not disgrace the name?

Disgracing God's Name

The same kind of disgrace is caused when one who wears the name of God lives a carnal, worldly, selfish life. For instance, when Israel broke their covenant with God, their disobedience polluted His name, God said (Jeremiah 34:16).

Jesus roundly condemned the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. Through their public display of worship and careful observance of the ceremonial law, they gave the impression that they were true servants of God. But Jesus, calling them hypocrites, declared that their hearts were far from God (Mark 7:6). Their private lives were not at all consistent with their showy public profession (see Matthew 23:13-33).

In Romans 2:17-24 Paul declared that this kind of hypocrisy brought shame and disgrace to the name of God. "Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you" (Romans 2:23, 24).

Consequences of Hypocrisy

Wearing and using the name of Christ while living a sinful life has serious consequences. First it results in eternal damnation for the hypocrite himself, as Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23.

Even more serious than this, however, is the fact that it results in the eternal damnation of many other souls. How many are turned away from Christ and His church by the hypocritical life of one who wears Christ's name? Any soul-winner will testify that the hypocritical church member is one of the greatest hindrances to evangelism and church growth.

Thus the third Commandment requires that we who wear the name of Christ live a life consistent with His holy name. We must be holy, as He is holy (1 Peter 1:16). "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" (2 Timothy 2:19).