

## The Third Commandment - God's Name in Vain

*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. (Exo 20:7)*

When I was about thirteen, I became very interested in the meaning of names, and purchased a book on the meaning of names. You grow up taking people's names for granted, and in English, most of our names are inherited from other languages, so we don't usually know the meaning of our names. I remember going to school and having a good deal of fun reading with others what everyone's name meant.

A person's name is so strongly connected to who he is, that some people will tell you the sweetest sound to any person is the sound of his own name. How you use somebody's name, becomes very much the way you see and treat that person. A person's name is so tied to who they are, that the very way you pronounce their name, how often you use it, the way you relate it to others, demonstrates what you think of that person.

The third commandment is all about how we treat the name of God. But from the very beginning, God's people have over-literalised this commandment, and missed the forest for the trees. The Jews so wanted to reverence the name of God, that when the scribes were copying out the Scriptures, they would take a bath every time they wrote out the name of God. By the time of Jesus, it was common to use the word "heaven" to substitute for the word God, as a way of showing reverence. To this day, when Jews read out loud the Hebrew Scriptures, when they come to the name of God, Yahweh, they will substitute the word Adonai, Lord, instead. That practice came even into Bible translation which is why you will see the name Yahweh translated into LORD in our English Bibles. Many Jews today refer to God as *HaShem*, the Name.

And in all this, there seems to be a very scrupulous protection of the actual name of God, while, in some ways, missing what the commandment really means.

One of the problems with understanding the third commandment is that there is nowhere in Scripture where the Bible explicitly shows us how you take God's name in vain. If you say to someone, 'Hey, you're taking God's name in vain', he may reply, "Show me the Scripture which explains exactly how we do that." And if you fall for that line, you'll be silenced, because Scripture doesn't tell you in black and white, how to apply this command. But that does not mean it cannot be applied. It simply means God expects us to use wisdom, judgement, discernment to apply the principle to life. He expects us to understand what is meant by His name, and what is meant by taking it in vain.

Here is how we will approach this. We will firstly learn what it is meant by taking in vain. Then we will consider the two ways this can be done.

First, what does it mean to take God's name in vain? The word for vain means something worthless, something empty, something common, something without value. It means you take something and treat it in a way that trivialises it and makes it ordinary. Another word for this act of making something holy into something ordinary is the word *profane*.

We speak of profanity when speaking of using God's name in vain, but there is a deeper and broader understanding of what it means to profane something. The word profane appears in the NKJV 36 times, and always in connection with something holy – God's name, God's temple, God's sabbath, God's offerings. What does profane mean? Profane actually comes from two Latin words, *pro-*, and *fanum*. *Fanum* means *temple*, and *pro*, means before. When worshippers came to their temple, they left their common, everyday objects in front of the temple, outside the temple, so as to treat the temple itself as holy, sacred, unique. When they worshipped, they recognised their gods were unique, holy, different, and so they did not want to treat their worship, and their nature as ordinary. Worship was supposed to be unique, holy, other.

To treat the temple like your lounge was to profane it. To treat the sacrifice like your own meal was to profane it. To treat the day like any other day was to profane it. You were dragging the holy down to the level of the common.

This is what the idea is behind taking God's name in vain. To take it in vain is to treat it in such a way that you make His name ordinary, common, casual, lightweight, empty, even dirty. The opposite of taking His name in vain is that line we all learnt when we learnt the Lord's Prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Hallowed means to be set apart as unique, as pure, as holy, as separate from sin, and separate from what is ordinary, and casual, and worthless. We are praying, may your Name be regarded as special, worthy, glorious.

We could say this commandment means: *God's name and reputation is holy, so do not in any way lessen it.*

Now I want you to understand that the third commandment is entirely a matter of *how* you treat the name of God. We all use the same vocabulary, People taking God's name in vain, and people hallowing His name are all using the same words. The third commandment is not about *what* you say, it all about *how* you say it.

Let us consider two ways that this third commandment applies. Two ways in which we are at risk of profaning, making common the name of God. The first is to how we use God's name, on our lips. The second is how we represent God's name, with our lives.

### **I. Don't Lessen God's Name With Your Lips**

The most obvious way we know to take God's name in vain is to use the names and titles of God and His Son as some kind of word to swear or curse, or simply to express exclamation. Whether it's God or Lord or Christ, or Heaven or Hell or damn, these are all words with very important meanings. When someone is damned, it is the worst thing in reality, and to go to Hell is the worst thing in reality. Heaven is the very abode of God and the place of highest glory. So when we use the names of these places, or the act of being damned to Hell, or the very names of Jesus Christ, Lord, God, for the purpose of just expressing surprise, or shock, or frustration, or amazement, or enjoyment, we are taking something holy and dragging it into being common. We are emptying those things of their serious real meaning, and using them to just add some spice to our language.

Sadly, people no longer even notice when they are doing that.

I remember being told about an ex-marine who worked as a mechanic, and one of his co-workers would continually swear and curse using God's name whenever he got hurt, or was frustrated. And this ex-marine was a new Christian and was getting increasingly frustrated with this man. Finally, the man swore again, using God's name, so the ex-marine, took a hammer, and hit his own thumb, and then screamed, "Oh, Devil, Satan!" His co-worker looked at him as if he was mad, and asked, "What in the world are you doing?" He said, "Well, every time you get hurt, you use my Father's name to swear, so I thought from now on, whenever I get hurt, I'll use your father's name to swear." That's the irony of using holy words to swear – you want to use them because they are special, and it's their very specialness that makes you want to use them to add oomph to your speech, but the more you do that, the less power they have, precisely because you're profaning them.

And of course, we have developed a large vocabulary of substitute swear words, which supposedly lets us off the hook. We don't say God, we say *gosh*, *golly*; we don't say Jesus, we say *Geez*, *Gee Whiz*, *Jeeslike*, *Juslaaik*, *Jeeper Creepers*, we don't say *hell* we say *heck*, we don't say *damn* we say *darn*. Should we be commended for using these words instead of the actual names of God?

*"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' 34 "But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 "nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 "Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.  
(Mat 5:33-37)*

The Jews thought if they used Heaven or Earth as substitute words for God's name, it got them off the hook. But Jesus says, you are not fooling God. You can't escape what you are referring to when you use some word that could be traced back to God or His rule. We can use these minced oaths, but God knows we are not escaping profanity by changing a few letters or syllables in the word.

These are obvious ways in which we use the same vocabulary, but *how* we say it and for what purpose, takes God's name in vain.

But sometimes, people are not using God's name to swear or curse, sometimes they use it supposedly religious purposes. Is it possible to use God's name in an empty way in Christian circles?

I read of a man who would go to a Christian bookstore, where the shop attendant used to say as a kind of verbal hiccup, "Praise God, Praise God!" And one day, a man who was annoyed with this, waited until she said it again, "Praise God, Praise God." And he said, "Okay, go ahead." She was floored. It had never occurred to her that she was continually giving a call to worship. And in Christian circles, words like Hallelujah, Thank God, Praise the Lord, can very easily become empty words that just mean "That's nice". Once again, the vocabulary for hallowing God's name and profaning His name is identical. You can use 'hallelujah' and 'praise the Lord' and 'thank God' as ways of hallowing Him if that's what you truly mean. But if you just want a verbal filler between sentences, just say 'um'.

When people speak to you, how many times do they use your name in the conversation? Maybe a few times. What would you make of the man who kept using your name every fourth or fifth word in the sentence? Why then do we feel that it is okay to use God's name every five or six words when we pray.

Can we use God's name in praise in ways that profane Him?

When I was in a youth group, we used to sing a song that was a game. We would be split into two groups. When it was your group's turn to sing, you would stand up and sing, and usually shout your words, and then sit down. Then the other group would stand and sing their part. And the song just went like this: "Halle-lu, Halle-lu, Hallelu, Hallelujah, Praise ye the Lord." And of course, for us, the whole aim of that song was the sitting and standing, who was confused, and who wasn't, who stood up and sat down at the wrong time, and it always caused lots of laughter.

But as I think about it now, I ask, what were we learning about the word "Hallelujah" when we did that? Do you know what Hallelujah means? It means Praise Yahweh. So there we were, shouting "Praise Yahweh" "Praise Yahweh" at each other, as a game. We were using His name as a game for fun, for ridicule. We were not hallowing His name. We were profaning His name.

Children's songs are sometimes the worst at this. Sometimes they are silly, and sometimes they are downright profane. They do not teach our children that God is love, they teach our children that God is funny, and silly, and can be dismissed like all the other things they outgrow.

Are children's songs the only praise songs that profane God's name?

What if we took the same vocabulary that we can use to hallow God's name, and put it into a form that makes people giggle. One of my seminary professors used the example of a limerick. When you hear a limerick begin, what do you do?

There was an old man from Peru  
who dreamed he was eating his shoe.  
He awoke one dark night  
from a terrible fright  
to discover his dream had come true!

There once was an old man of Esser,  
Whose knowledge grew lesser and lesser,  
It at last grew so small  
He knew nothing at all  
And now he's a college professor.

What will happen if I take sacred truth, the same vocabulary, and put it into a form, which makes people giggle? Will the words change what a limerick does, or will the very form and shape of a limerick affect how those words sound? What have we done if the vocabulary is the same, but the form, the shape we have used to package them, no longer makes people feel awe, but feel laughter, or perhaps amusement, or maybe the feelings they have when they revel?

Let's imagine a man who loves sin. He loves sin so much, he wants to make music about it, and he wants others to revel in it too. He loves immoral sex, he loves rebellion, he loves violence, he loves pride. So he looks around and he finds the music of Bach and Mozart doesn't work for telling the stories he wants to tell. So try to imagine in your mind the kind of music he makes that says, enjoy immorality, please yourself, defy authority, live your own way. And once he's got the music, he then adds words which glorify the sin he loves.

Now imagine a Christian comes along and he sees how many people love that music. And so he takes the music, and strips it of its words, and adds words about loving righteousness, glorifying God and pleasing Him.

Question: will the message of the words change the message of the original music, or will the message of the music affect and change the message of his words? Will the Christian words he adds hallow the music, or will the music profane his message?

Remember, taking God's name in vain has nothing to do with the vocabulary. It has to do with *how* you say it. Music is really like tone of voice: you can use a tone of voice that communicates that your words are angry, sad, happy, comical, seductive, silly, serious, and a hundred other emotions. You can do that with music too.

Criminals do money laundering, where they take money that was used for crime, and put it into legitimate businesses to 'clean' the dirty money. Modern Christians are the only ones I know that think it is possible to do music laundering – where you take music meant for the glorification of sin, and by adding Christian words, you think it has magically changed into a clean and pure vessel for God's honour. It is not only what you say, it is how you say it.

What about our intentions? We saw last week that sincerity, intentions, motives do not make up for

disobedience. If *how* I say it, if *how* I pray it, if *how* I sing it, if *how* I play it, reduces God's name to what is common, to what is everyday, to what is silly, to what is comical, I have profaned the name of God.

When we use God's name in everyday speech, in praise, in prayer, we need to hallow it as the name most precious to us.

There is a second way we can either profane or hallow God's name, and it goes far beyond how you actually pronounce or sing or pray with His name.

## **II. Don't Lessen God's Name With Your Life**

*"Therefore I poured out My fury on them for the blood they had shed on the land, and for their idols with which they had defiled it 19 "So I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries; I judged them according to their ways and their deeds. 20 "When they came to the nations, wherever they went, they profaned My holy name-- when they said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they have gone out of His land.' 21 "But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went. 22 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. 23 "And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD," says the Lord GOD, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. 24 "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. (Eze 36:18-24)*

Was Israel profaning God's name through speech or through action? Through action. By their behaviour, and by their being identified with Jehovah, God's reputation was affected. God's name is tied to His people, and the way they act affects His name.

*Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed. (1Ti 6:1)*

Wouldn't it be a strange thing to see a boy who deeply honours his father's actual name, and stands for a moment's silence whenever it is said, but then becomes a notorious mischief maker everywhere he goes? At some point, someone will catch him and say, "Whose son are you? Who raised you? Who taught you manners?" And what will the effect be on the father's reputation?

There was a time when people really cared about the family name. In the European tradition, there is a whole art of heraldry, where families have family crests handed down over generations. Fathers would say to sons "You're a Smith, and don't you forget it. The family name is resting on you."

Whose name do we carry when we are believers?

*"if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves (2Ch 7:14)*

*Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him." (Isa 43:7)*

*Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? (Jam 2:7)*

*They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. (Rev 22:4)*

You are converted on the day you call on the name of the Lord. And ever after that, you are called by His name. You carry His reputation with you. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 that we are his ambassadors.

How many times have we met people who tell us they want nothing to do with Christ because of so-called Christians. People who name the name of Christ but sleep together before marriage, who cheat, who steal from their company, who live in regular conflict with their neighbours, whose children run riot and are filled with disrespect and rebellion, who break their word, who cut legal

corners. And they tell everyone that they are Christians.

How many times I have seen some car with a bumper sticker claiming some kind of relationship with Christ, or perhaps the Ichthus symbol, and the way the person drove, and the way they treated the other drivers, and I've just wished they had never identified themselves publicly with Christ.

Or what of the false teachers who go on global satellite television telling everyone that they name Christ, and they represent Him and His teaching, and His ideals.

Alexander the Great was known for his almost reckless courage and fearless leadership. His men followed him because he led battles from the front. Once after a battle, one of his own men had been caught deserting, fleeing in the midst of battle. The punishment for deserting was usually death. He was brought before Alexander and made to kneel, and his charge was read. Alexander said to the man, "What is your name?" The man replied, without looking up, "Alexander, sire." Alexander the Great's eyes widened, and he stood up and went to them man, and in a louder voice, asked "I said, what is your name?" The man, trembling with fear, replied, "Alexander, sire." Alexander the Great lifted the man up off his knees by his shirt, and shouted just inches from his face, "What is your name?" The man kept silent, not knowing what to say. Alexander put him down, and said, "Change your conduct or change your name."

If we carry the name of Christ, then we carry that name when we drive, when we shop, when we make deals and manage others, when we go to the gym, and the mall, and the restaurant. Christians should have manners that honour Christ. Christians should have business ethics that honour Christ. Christians should have standards of personal purity in relationships that honour Christ. Christians should set before their eyes and watch for their entertainment what does not dishonour Christ. Christians should have a work ethic that honours Christ.

By the way, that's one of the reasons why faithful churches do church discipline. If someone comes to your church and claims to be a member, and dishonours Christ, they bring scandal on the name of our Lord in the eyes of the world. And it is best that person resign membership or repent.

The word *Christians* only occurs three times in the Bible. They were first called Christians at Antioch. Christians – one's belonging to Messiah. Those naming Jesus the Messiah as their own. Followers, disciples of Messiah Jesus. That's what I say when I announce myself as a Christian.

It begins when you come to fear the Lord yourself. You will never respect His name, and you will never be sensitive to His reputation, if you do not know His person. That's why it begins with an internal work. In that passage of Ezekiel, God tells Israel how they will stop blaspheming His name and begin hallowing it.

26 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

(Eze 36:26-27)

To protest to the world that they should no longer use God's name that way, when they had no respect for His person, was a protest bound to fall on deaf ears. People hardly notice anymore, because you cannot respect the words unless you respect the meaning behind the words.

It's fine and well to tell unbelievers that we don't appreciate the way they use His name. But what is needed is an internal change to where you come to receive Christ as Lord and Saviour, receive a new heart, and grow in love and respect for His name and His reputation.

The words of a hymn say "There is a name I love to hear, I love to sing its worth. It sounds like music in mine ear, the sweetest name on Earth." So how much is that name worth to you? What do you do, and what will you do this week, to Hallow His name?