

God's Name: Futile Or Useful

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"That God___n jerk!" Did you feel a twinge as you read this opening exclamation? People often feel indignant and react quickly when they hear the Lord's name taken in vain. Too often people react with more vigor to such a statement than to actions which are worse. Why? The answer is quick and obvious. The ten commandments order us not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

The third commandment says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." (Exodus 20:7 KJV) Is an exclamation like the opening phrase for this article really a violation of the third commandment or is there more at stake in this commandment than a momentary outburst?

What Is God's Name

Most people accept that "Jehovah" or "YAHWEH" is God's name. "God" is not Jehovah's name. The word "god" tells us what kind of being Jehovah is, as the word "human" tells us what kind of beings we are. I know a man named John, and he is not a plant, animal, or god. He is a human. I know a spirit named Jehovah, and he is not a plant, animal, or human. He is a god and indeed is the God.

Since the actual name of God was not used in the opening exclamation, was it indeed a violation of the third commandment having to do with the **name** of God? Read the commandment in a more literal translation: "Thou shalt not take the name of **Jehovah** thy God in vain; for **Jehovah** will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." (Exodus 20:7 ASV) I don't want to split semantic hairs. There is much more at stake than a simple exclamation, regardless of how you answer the question. My purpose in pointing out the distinction about God's name is to stimulate thinking about how inadequate present understanding of the third commandment often is.

In Vain

Don't confuse cursing, swearing, and profanity with each other. They are different and taking the name of the Lord in vain is not any of the three. The dictionary definitions of these words are:

Curse	To appeal to a supernatural power for evil to befall someone or something; to invoke evil on, damn; to bring evil upon, afflict
Swear	To make a solemn declaration; to promise, vow; to assert under oath; to administer a legal oath to; to affirm with great conviction
Profane	Showing contempt or irreverence for what is sacred, blasphemous; nonreligious, secular, common; vulgar, coarse
Vain	Not successful, futile; lacking substance or worth, hollow

In vain To no avail, unsuccessfully

The original Hebrew translated "in vain" primarily means: emptiness, vanity; anything that is unsubstantial, unreal, worthless, useless, or futile. The strong secondary meaning is: falsehood or lie.

As you can see, all of these words deal with deeds which are very different from merely saying naughty words. Indeed, when you consider the definition of vain, you begin to wonder why it became so strongly identified with using the word, "god", with a simple curse word. It becomes even more perplexing when you consider that people don't use "damn" for a curse any more. They use the word as an expletive, not to invoke supernatural powers to harm someone. Again, I don't want to split hairs. I want to expose imprecise and prevalent thinking about the third commandment.

To do something in vain is not to say bad words. Two illustrations will explain the proper understanding of the phrase.

First, consider a situation in which a detective is about to run warrants on a drug dealer from Columbia. The detective will spend hours of painstaking work to do a good investigation and to collect the information needed for a judge to issue warrants. The detective will be especially careful with volumes of paperwork so that the dealer will not escape prosecution because of technicalities. The police will coordinate their actions at the site where the warrants are to be served. Then the moment comes. They enter the building, search the premises, and look for the dealer. If the dealer has already left the country, never to return, then the work done to arrest him was in vain. The work accomplished nothing. It was useless.

Second, think about a young woman going to college. She is paying thousands of dollars for tuition, fees, and living accommodations. She is spending many hours attending classes. If she is not studying, doing homework, nor preparing assignments, she will never pass. She is attending college in vain. She is going through useless motions, because she will never graduate.

Taking A Name

What does it mean to "take the name of the Lord" or, as in some translations, to "take up the name of the Lord"? Does taking up the name of the Lord simply mean to utter the word Jehovah? No! Taking up the name of the Lord means much more.

A person in law enforcement has taken up the name "police officer" or title appropriate to his position. Before a person is officially established as a police officer, he can't use that name. He can't do the things that a police officer does. When a person acts under the name of police officer, he is acting under the name and in the authority of the government agency he represents. When a person acting under the color of his badge is asked, "What is your name", he will answer, "Officer Doe." He has taken up the name of officer and has assumed the authority, privileges, obligations, and responsibilities that go with the name.

A police officer who uses his position for crime is not truly a police officer. An officer must not burglarize businesses, extract money for official favors, accept bribes, or do any other criminal acts. If an officer does these things, he has taken the name in vain. The name is meaningless. He has dishonored the agency in which he serves. His agency hired and trained him in vain. He has been a false and useless officer.

Another false police officer is one who does not take his oath and responsibilities

seriously. An officer can't be lazy, indifferent, and self-centered. He must answer his calls with dispatch, patrol proactively, deal with the public with justice, assure that all people are protected equally by the law, and perform all his duties conscientiously. If an officer only looks out for himself, never takes any risks, and does the absolute minimum to keep his job, he is unworthy of the name of police officer. He has been appointed as an officer in vain just as the criminal described above.

When a person takes on the name of police officer, we rightly expect more of him. When a criminal burglarizes a business, we condemn his crime. When a police officer burglarizes a business or refuses to go to the aid of a citizen, we despise and condemn. To falsely and vainly take the name of police officer is despicable.

On the other hand, a police officer who seriously and conscientiously protects the public, apprehends criminals, protects the rights of all citizens, and serves the public through good law enforcement, is truly a police officer. He deserves the name and carries it proudly.

Taking The Name Of God

If you say, "I am a Christian", you have taken up the name of the Lord. You are saying that you are a follower of Christ. He is the supervisor, and you are the subordinate. You have accepted all the privileges, responsibilities, authority, and obligations of being a Christian. Expectations for you have been changed to a different standard.

Being Religious

Many people don't understand what it means to be a Christian whether they go to church and call themselves Christians, simply say they believe in God, or profess no religion at all. There are many misconceptions and false opinions. **Being a Christian is not the same as being a religious person.** Almost all errors in understanding the nature of Christianity are rooted in the identification of being a Christian with being religious.

There are many faithful, religious people in Christian churches throughout America. They are trying to do good and to fulfill all the requirements of their religion. The religious urge in them is very strong and is often seen in acts of charity, humanitarian deeds, and other things that show what good religious people they are. These people are not Christians. They would have been faithful to a corresponding religion in any country in which they happen to have been born.

The religious urge in people is common, perhaps universal. People want to be good, but intuitively they sense and know their failings. They tend to attach themselves to a religious system that gives them rules and laws to obey. They can go to church, give offerings, do acts of charity, learn catechisms, remain faithful to their spouses, not cuss, not smoke, not get drunk, not get angry, and follow many other regulations. They believe that they will be accepted by God when they do these things. By their own efforts they are trying to show that they are good and to earn their way to God. They are completely mistaken in their approach, because people can never deserve to be with God.

Religion is man striving to deserve to be with God. Christianity is God reaching to undeserving man. A Christian is a person who realizes that he is morally bankrupt and is unable to be good enough to be with God. If a person tries for a million years to deserve to be with God, he will fail.

God does not say that he will love and accept us if we do good. He loves us and forgives our failures just as we are. God does not deal with us according to our failures.

Rather, he remembers our weak, finite frames and extends merciful love to all who accept it through Jesus Christ.

If a person who calls himself a Christian is simply being religious, he has taken the name of the Lord in vain. A person who calls himself a Christian but does not truly trust Jesus as savior or sincerely follow him as master has taken the name of the Lord in vain. The third commandment involves issues of life that are infinitely more important than the simple expletive to which people with limited and narrow vision have relegated it.

Being A Christian

What does it mean to take up the name of the Lord, to be a Christian? A Christian is a person who has taken up the name of Christ as savior and as master.

A Christian trusts Jesus as savior because he knows his own spiritual poverty. He knows that his life will be inadequate to stand on its own in the final court when all of his deeds, words, and secret thoughts are exposed to the courtroom and judged by the standard of perfect justice. A Christian trusts that Jesus will save him from the guilty verdict and corresponding sentence which that final court would otherwise justly decree.

A Christian follows Jesus as master because there is no other fully adequate model, teacher, or boss. Strip yourself of insufficient beliefs about what it means to follow and obey Jesus. Being a Christian does not mean: "I won't cuss, drink, smoke, or chew - or go with the girls that do." Being a Christian is much, much more.

Since a Christian is a person who is following Jesus, it makes sense for a Christian to see what commands his Lord has issued. Jesus only spoke of three commands during his entire life. Of these three, **only one was a new command issued by him**. All three commands have to do with love.

The two commands that he affirmed are found in the following passage from Matthew:

37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Mat 22:37-40 RSV)

The only command Jesus ever gave is found in the following passage from John:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (Joh 13:34 RSV)

A Christian is a person who loves. Love is not weak nor is it something relegated to bleeding hearts. Most concepts of love are woefully inadequate. Follow Jesus completely, study the Bible diligently, seek God's wisdom, and strive to love truly. You will begin to understand love a little in this life. After you have sought love for a million years in the Kingdom of God, you will begin to understand how far you still have to go. I will expound

on this concept of love in my next article.

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