

You Shall Not Take God's Name in Vain

Exodus 20:1-2; 7

October 4, 2020

Phil Moran

I have an indelible memory from when I was seven or eight years old. I was playing croquet in the back yard with one of my sisters. When I missed a shot, I used an expression I had recently learned from some older boys on the playground. I felt very manly saying it. Unfortunately, my mother heard it, and descended upon me with all the wrath and fury of an Old Testament prophet. I said the memory is indelible. In fact, I think you can still make out the imprint of the wooden spoon on my rear end.

Now, is this what the third commandment is getting at when it says, *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain?* In part, yes! Profanity take the name of the holy and merciful God and uses His name as a wounding word, a destroying word. When someone or something is *damned* in the name of God, it is a gross misuse of the name of the God who sent His Son into the world not to condemn, but to save.

But the third commandment goes much deeper than that. It is difficult for modern people like us to grasp the full force of the commandment until we understand the power and significance of God's *name* in the minds of Old Testament people. "You shall not take God's *name* in vain."

For Old Testament Jews, the name of a person expresses something of the essence of a person. The name was a verbal expression of the person's unique character. The sound of the name itself was filled with power and vitality. A transforming life experience could result in a person being renamed, symbolizing a new identity.

The people of the Old Testament, and observant Jews to this day, regard the name of God as so holy that it cannot be pronounced aloud. So, how are we today to understand this ancient commandment: *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain?* The key is found in the Hebrew word that is traditionally translated – *in vain*. The Hebrew word – *shav* – actually has two layers of meaning. The first layer is from the later part of Old Testament history, while the earliest layer of meaning comes from the very ancient dawn of Israel's history.

I'm going to treat it like an archaeological dig and take the top layer – the more recent layer – first. In this later meaning, *shav* (in vain), means *to empty* – to treat something as empty or without substance. Psalm 31:6 uses this word to describe false idols: "*I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols.*" Idols – false gods – are empty, they have no substance. The author of 1 Samuel uses this word to describe the Medium of Endor. King Saul sought her out to summon up the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel. She is described as having an "empty" or "hollow" spirit. So, first of all, the third commandment forbids us to use God's name as if it were hollow, as if it had no content.

Note carefully: this commandment is not directed to those who ignore God. It's not about those who never take God's name on their lips. It is directed to believers, to people who have God's name on their lips! We are not to empty God's name with flattery and adoration that is

not matched by the reality of our lives. God warns against any use of His name in which He is *apparently* honored, but the words are actually rendered empty by our failure to live up to what we say. We deceive ourselves so easily. We often think that because we have spoken something, therefore we have done something.

I had an acquaintance in college who was something of an amateur military expert. He seemed to have extensive knowledge of Army life. He knew weapons and tactics. He always walked around the campus wearing green fatigues. In a sense, he was very knowledgeable. But if you pressed him, you discovered that he had never served a day in the military, and had no intention of serving. He was a fraud. The reality of his life rendered his talk empty. Jesus said, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21).

This does not mean that only perfect Christians can ever talk about God! If that were the case, Christian pulpits would fall silent all over the world! To be a disciple is to be on a journey with Christ. Maybe you’ve just begun the journey. Perhaps some of us are farther down the road, but none of us has arrived! The warning of the third commandment is to those who use the name but refuse the journey. You shall not misuse God’s name with empty talk that is not grounded in a life of discipleship.

Now let’s dig down to the more ancient meaning of *shav* (in vain). This older layer of meaning refers to the practice of occult magic or sorcery that was common in the ancient world, and still around today. Occult practices, whether ancient or modern, always seek to tap into spiritual forces and manipulate those forces to do our will. So, the third commandment forbids the use of God’s name as if it were a magic incantation to fulfill our plans.

When a television preacher tells you that if you just have enough faith, God will bless you with great wealth, that is a violation of the third commandment. Sometimes they are cruel: if you would have enough faith, and pray just the right way, God would heal your cancer. Do you see what they are doing? They are using the name of God as if it were a magical incantation, as if God were a genie in a bottle obliged to grant our wishes when we call on His name. The third commandment warns against this misuse of God’s name. **But we have no need of sorcerers, gurus, card readers or astrologers, because God speaks for Himself.** God has spoken clearly in His Word.

The crucial question is this: if we are not to take God’s name in vain; if we are not to treat God’s name as empty, then what are we to do? What is the rightful use of God’s name?

The Ten Commandments are stated negatively – Thou shalt *not*. But behind each of the prohibitions there is a **GRAND POSITIVE**. Jesus stated the third commandment positively when He taught us how to pray. He said, *“When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do . . . pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:7-10). God’s name is *hallowed* (as opposed to emptied) when the people who take His name do His will on earth! And we are not in the dark about God’s will, because God has spoken. The 119th Psalm powerfully speaks this truth:

*Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law,
and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. (Psalm 119:33-35)*

Ultimately, we dare not treat God as nothing, because God has not treated us as nothing. God has loved us enough to reveal His will to us. God has a will and intention for our lives and for this world. We dare not treat God as nothing because God did not make this world for nothing. God did not send His Son for nothing. Jesus did not give His life on the cross for nothing. He was not raised from the dead for nothing.

Did you know that God knows your name? God knows your name and you are precious to Him. God has not treated you as nothing. He has called you by name. Isaiah 43:1 says,

*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob,
He who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you:
I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

Jesus Christ did not come into the world “for whom it may concern.” He didn’t go to the cross “for whom it may concern.” He went to the cross and died in your place with your name in His heart. He says, *“I have called you by name, and you are mine.”*

The God who speaks through the Ten Commandments has made Himself known. He has come to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ who gave His life on the cross for us. He has loved us with an everlasting love. Therefore, we have no need of magical incantations or our own empty talk. Ours is only to hear His voice, and receive His life, and follow where He leads.