
The Third Commandment: You Shall Not Take the Name of the Lord Your God in Vain

by: Ronald L. Dart

When you were a kid, did anyone ever make fun of your name? Chances are pretty good they did. Sometimes it was funny. Sometimes it hurt, but of course it hurts to be made fun of, your nose is too big, or if your ears look like someone left the doors open on a 48 Chevy pickup, but there's something about your name that makes the name a special target. Your name is who you are and after you have lived on this earth for a while, your name, well, your name is you. When someone uses your name, you and you alone are the sum total of what they're talking about. You are the meaning of your name.

Do Not Take God's Name in Vain

So, when God says in Exodus 20, verse 7, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain," maybe we need to take that seriously.

God's name is not a playground joke. I had not noticed until Dr. Laura Schlesinger pointed it out in her book on "The Ten Commandments," "Of all the Ten Commandments, giving God a bad name, is the only one with a threat of immediate punishment." Did you catch it?

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain."

But what does that mean? Literally, it means that we should not lift up or bear the name of God in vain that we must not abuse the name of God.

YHVH - LORD

Now there is a convention in your Bible that you should be aware of. The word 'LORD' in small capital letters is a translation of the Hebrew name of God. The Hebrew word for God is YHVH,

which is sometimes pronounced Yahweh. Now there is some uncertainty about the pronunciation because ancient Hebrew is written without vowels, and because the Jews are meticulous about not breaking God's commandment, they do not carelessly speak the name of God.

When reading in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jews substitute commonly Adonai, which translates LORD, and so in the English version of the Jewish Bible, they translate YHVH or YHWH, the name of God, as LORD. In some places in the Bible, the King James Bible, you'll find the name Jehovah. This is a combination of the vowels of Adonai, with the consonants of YHWH, and many people not knowing that the 'J' is pronounced like a 'Y' speak of the God of the Old Testament as Jehovah, and that's where that name for the God of the Old Testament comes from.

Now, does that mean you can take the word 'God' in vain, since that is what He is and not his name. Well, hardly, to speak abusively using any of the names, or designations of God is to break the Third Commandment. And God has many names in many languages. All of them are holy.

The Burning Bush

Moses was introduced to Yahweh on a singular occasion. You'll find it in the third chapter of Exodus. Verse 1, "Moses was keeping the sheep of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the backside of the desert and he came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb, {2} And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush and he looked and behold, the bush was burning with fire but the bush was not consumed. {3} And Moses said, "I'm going to go over there and look at this. Why is that Bush burning and not burning up?" {4} When the Lord saw that Moses turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses." And Moses said, "Here I am." {5} And the LORD said, "Don't walk any closer. Take off your shoes, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground." {6} Then God identified Himself to Moses. He said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob," when Moses heard all this, "He hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God."

God had come to Moses with a message, and with a mission. He was going to send him down into Egypt, "And the LORD said, {7} "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt. I've heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters. I know their sorrows {8} And I've come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, to bring them up out of that land into a good land and a large one. Now therefore," verse nine, he says, ""Look, the cry of the children of Israel has come up to me. I have seen their oppression. I'm going down there with you and we are going to get them out." {13} "And Moses said, "Look, when I come to the children of Israel, and I say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me unto you," and they shall say to me, "What's his name?" What do you want me to tell them?""

That's interesting, Moses felt quite certain that when he got down there and he told the people, "The God of Abraham," they're going to ask, "What is this God's name?" Because the names of the gods were how people knew them in the ancient world.

"And God said to Moses," {14} "I AM THAT I AM. When they ask you, "What is his name, you shall say to the children of Israel. "I AM has sent me unto you." {15} He went on and said, "This shall you say to the children of Israel, Yahweh, God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me unto you, this is my name forever and this is my memorial to all generations."

Meaning of Names

Now there is an error here that beckons the English reader, because you sit here wondering, "Wait a minute, is His name, 'I AM' or is it 'Yahweh?'" For us a name is a mere word that carries no meaning of its own. It's a set of symbols on paper or a phonetic sound that falls on the ear. Change the symbols or change the sound and you are no longer talking about Me.

Names in the ancient world were not like that, they were words that had meaning, and the spelling, the sound, even the language could change, and the meaning of the name would survive and therefore people understood the identity of the One they were talking about. Actually, we are all pretty familiar with something like this from Cowboy and Indian movies, where Indians were known by names like 'Black Eagle' and no matter how you translate it, and however you pronounce it, in whatever language, it still means 'black eagle.'

In the ancient world, names were like that. And oftentimes, it could be said, "The eagle is black," and you still knew who they were talking about. It was like that in Hebrew with names.

"I AM"

So, God told Moses His name. He told him first what it meant. He said, "I AM THAT I AM."

"I AM" is the first person singular of the verb for "existence" and it is translatable directly into any language of man. In fact, because it is the most commonly used verb in any language, that is the verb 'to be', it is always the most corrupt in any language. It is really something when you learn Latin, when you learn French, when you learn German, whatever language it is, when you deal with the conjugations of the verb 'to be', you are always dealing with the most unusual and corrupt form of the verb. 'I am,' no matter where you go means exactly the same thing, and that is what God's name means, 'I am.' Not 'I was', not 'I will be,' but in whatever age, whatever time, no matter where you find Me, 'I am.'

The Moffatt Bible translation translates 'Yahweh' in the Old Testament as, 'the Eternal,' merely meaning, 'the one who simply is, at all times, in all places.'

In Hebrew, the name was 'Yahweh' or if the vowels are a little different, it is 'Yehovah.'

God Almighty

Now there is a strange thing about this, that you have to understand. A little later in Exodus in chapter 6, verse two, God has this to say to Moses, He said, "I am Yahweh. {3} And I appeared

unto Abraham and Isaac and unto Jacob by the name of God Almighty, but by my name Yehovah, I was not known to them."

Now how is that possible? How is it possible that God's name is Yehovah, and Abraham, who was a friend of God, did not know the name, he only knew Him as God Almighty, or El Shaddai. El means 'all powerful.' El is the common word throughout the Middle East by which God was known in pre-Abrahamic times.

The answer to this question is really very simple, Yehovah or Yahweh is God's name in Hebrew. Abraham did not speak Hebrew. He came from Ur and spoke that language. In fact, in Abraham's day, Hebrew as such, may not have existed. Hebrew is not a divine language.

In the Bible, Hebrew is called the language of Canaan and it's a younger language even than Arabic.

So, it is just as wrong to blaspheme with 'God Almighty', as with any other name for God. The important thing is, who are we talking about, not how do we pronounce His name, but as a whole there is a lot more to taking God's name in vain.

Gone with The Wind

Most of my audience is not old enough to remember the scandalized reaction everyone had to the movie "Gone with the Wind." It was late in the movie where Scarlet O'Hara is whining about "What's going to happen to me?" Clark Gable looks over the stairs and says: "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn!" Now damn is a perfectly good Biblical word, but it had become a curse word. We didn't use curse words like that in movies in those days. People just didn't say that. This was the first time, I believe, and it was shocking to hear it. People were shocked. Times have changed. Movies routinely use the word 'God', and couple it with the word 'damn', and most people don't think anything of it.

Religious Leaders Denying the Lord

There are more ways to lift up or bear God's name in vain. Take for example second Peter chapter 2, Peter said, "There were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction, {2} and many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of."

Do you realize what he is saying? He is saying that there are going to be religious leaders, who take the name of Christ, who claim to be God's servants and who actually teach false things and cause the way of truth to be evil spoken of. In other words, when you bear the name of the Lord in vain, you abuse it and people turn away from God because of it. Peter goes on to say, {3} "Through covetousness, they would feign words, make merchandise of you, whose judgment, now of a long time lingers not, in their damnation slumbers not."

These are people who are in religion for power and for money. They carry the name of God, and of all the evils they do, one of the greatest is, they take God's name in vain by using it in their correspondence, using it on their letterheads, claiming to speak for God, and speaking falsely.

{13} Peter continues, "They are blemishes, they sport themselves with their own deceptions while they feast with you." They will sit down and eat with you and have a good time and yet they are deceiving you, {14} "Having eyes full of adultery, and cannot cease from sin, beguiling unstable souls. They exercise their heart with covetous practices, they are accursed children."

You kind of wonder when Peter's going to get around to saying exactly how he feels. You know they say, that 30% of church pastors have become involved sexually with someone in their church, other than their wives.

He says, "Having eyes full of adultery. " What do you think the effect is when people look at a church and they see a minister who ends up committing adultery while he carries the name of God, and lifts it up in his pulpit on Sunday mornings, and when he talks to people about God, and claims to represent God, and then he is found with another man's wife or with a teenage boy in sexual activity.

Right now, the nation is rocked with the scandal of pedophile priests. The press has picked it up and that little phrase, 'pedophile priests' for some alliteration and it rings from every newspaper, every television set, every radio news broadcast, and people struggle with what the church is going to do about the pedophile priests. I don't think I've heard anyone comment, that these men who carry the name of God, who lift up the name of God, who speak for God, who hear confessions in the name of God and who pass on absolution in the name of God, have blasphemed the name of God by their conduct. But this is one of the ways in which the Third Commandment is broken.

Balaam Denied the Lord

Peter says of these people in 2 Peter 2 verse 15, "They have forsaken the right way and they have gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness." The way of Balaam was to prophesy for money, his whole focus was on money. They had come after him and they had offered him money. At first, he wouldn't go and finally they offered him so much money he couldn't turn it down.

Money, power and you might say, 'money, power and sex', but the fact of the matter is sex is probably tucked in under power. So was money.

Balaam was rebuked for his iniquity. In fact, God in order to make His point really effective, spoke to Balaam through the mouth of his ass, his donkey, which spoke with a man's voice and forbade the madness of the prophet. That is a real statement about what God thought about what Balaam was doing.

Denying the Lord

These men, whose eyes are full of adultery, carry about the name of God. They teach false things for money but carry about the name of God.

2 Peter 2 verse 17, "They are wells without water, they are clouds that are carried with a tempest in the midst of darkness reserved forever, {18} For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those who were clean escape from them live in error."

There were people who had gotten out of the world and got led right back into it by these men speaking great swelling words of vanity.

Verse 19, "While they promise liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought into bondage. {20} For if after they have escaped the pollution of the world, through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

These are people who got out of the world and put on the Lord Jesus Christ and they lift Him up and they carry him about, and bear His name, "They again become entangled in the pollution of the world, and overcome, the latter end is worse than the beginning. {21} It would've been better for them, not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they had known it turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them."

You know it's one thing to cheat, lie, steal, and commit adultery. It's another thing to do it, carrying God's name. {22} "But it's happened to them according to the true proverb, "The dog has turned to his own vomit again, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.""

The Judas Factor

I wrote the book several years ago that was never published, in fact, I don't even know where I could find the manuscript today. The title of the book was, "The Judas Factor" and it was about the ways in which television evangelists raise money.

I wondered at the time how these people got so much money that they were able to spend huge amounts on television and I decided to take a look and find out, so I got on the mailing list of every evangelist I could find to see how they went about raising money. As I began to hear from them, the ideas formed, and I managed to write a 60,000 word book which nearly got published, but by the time I finished it, it was already out of date.

In the process, I'll tell you how they raise their money in the simplest terms. In many cases they lie! They raise money by promising to pray for people and then they never see the prayer requests. One of them claimed that God had given him a vision, that if he didn't raise so many million dollars by a certain date, that God would call him home, that is, He would take his life and kill him. He didn't raise the money, the date passed, he didn't die, he had lied.

There was this one letter I got from another evangelist. It was an interesting letter. I opened it up and began to read. He talked about a day when he was off camping in Colorado somewhere, and he was sitting under a tree with his back against the tree reading the Bible and a leaf fell out of a

tree and fell onto the page of his Bible, right onto a verse in the Bible, which he proceeded to quote to me. Then he developed that theme out into a strong fund-raising theme about what God commanded him to do, that he needed to go and take the gospel here and he needed money to do it and I was called by God to help him with the money to do it. Now in the envelope along with the letter, there was a little glassine envelope with the leaf that fell from the tree. I thought, "Wow, here's evidence that he sent me the leaf and I will say here, this leaf fell out of a tree, fell on to the man's Bible and he has sent it to me," but then I looked at the envelope, and the letter was sent "Bulk Mail."

Now to send anything 'bulk mail' you have to send at least 200 envelopes and they all have to be identical. That means all 200 of those letters had to have a leaf in a little glassine envelope, like mine. What did he have 200, 2,000, 20,000 leaves fall on the pages of his Bible? The man simply lied. He claimed that he was sending me the leaf that fell on his Bible and in fact, he had sent out probably 20,000 letters exactly like mine, each of them with a little aspen leaf in a glassine envelope in a letter.

Why did he lie? Well I think sometimes; these fellows think that the ends justify the means. They think that their work and what they're doing for God is so important that they are relieved of the normal restraints of morality, but the fact of the matter is, the man who wrote to me in the name of Jesus Christ, LIED. That my friends are a violation of the Third Commandment.

Deuteronomy 18 verse 20, "But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. {21} And if you say in your heart, how shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? {22} When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing follows not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: you shall not be afraid of him."

Would you like to hear what Peter said again? Second Peter chapter 2, Peter said, "There were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction, {2} and many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of."

This is going on, even as we speak. I will give you another classic example.

During that same period of time when I was writing the book, I got a letter from an evangelist raising money for an orphanage in Haiti. Now I knew that this ministry had an annual budget around \$18 million and that meant for his monthly fund-raising letter he had to raise an average of \$1.5 million dollars. He wrote his letter out to several thousand people. It had an envelope and a return card, and you could check the card and enclose a check if you were going to help him. He was raising money, this month, for an orphanage in Haiti. He had to raise, for his overall work, 1.5 million dollars.

Now they desperately needed for the orphanage, \$100,000. This was the dominant theme of the letter. All of the pictures were there. The appeal was just heartbreaking, the conditions under

which these orphans were living, and you could easily see how if a hundred thousand dollars popped into this orphanage would make a big difference. But when I read the fine print on the return card that went with your donation, you know you check a little box and you fill in the blank donating so much money and it says, "I hope to help you with your orphanage."

But when you read the fine print on the return card, it is right down at the bottom in very fine letters, it says, "That any excess money over the needs of the orphanage, over what was budgeted for the orphanage, would go to whatever the ministry wanted to spend the money for." How much money did they budget for the orphanage? One hundred thousand dollars. That's very good.

What was their monthly budget they had to raise? \$1.5 million. That means the orphanage got \$100,000 just like the evangelist said and the evangelist got 14 times that from this fund-raising letter.

Secret to Giving to a Ministry

Now there are honest and ethical means of raising money for religious causes, but the donor really has to read between the lines. Now I will give you, if you're interested, the secret to whether or not you should give to a ministry like this. Never give through a ministry to another charitable cause. If you want to give money to an orphanage, go find an orphanage and give money directly to it. Don't give money to a charitable ministry to give for you to the orphanage. Because very often, this orphanage is being used as a lead to raise money for the ministry's television work and whatever it is they're going to do. Television, folks, is very expensive.

So basically, what you should know is, when I give money to a ministry, I'm giving money to support what I see of that ministry, any booklets they publish, then I'm giving money to support their television program. I'm giving money to support that guy doing what he is doing. If you believe in that, feel free to send him the money, but otherwise, don't use a ministry on a pass-through for money going where you really want it to go.

How a Business Can Break the Third Commandment

But it isn't really just the preachers who lift up God's name in vain. Take the man who bought a small thriving business. It was a sandwich shop that a man and his wife had built, and it was a very popular luncheon spot, excellent sandwiches, sports on the TV in the corner, making good money. They sold out and took their profits and moved to Florida. The man who bought the business was a Christian. I know he was because he put a sign on the wall that said, 'Jesus is Lord,' and he switched the TV channel from sports to religious broadcasting.

Then he began to cheapen the quality of his sandwiches while he charged the same price that was charged before. He lifted up the name of the Lord, but he did not live up to the name of the Lord. His entire business effort, because he put Jesus' name on the wall, was a violation of the Third Commandment.

If you're going to lift up the name of Jesus, you had better plan on living up to it. There is some justice in this world, that poor guy lost his shirt in that business and closed it down.

Don't Blame God

There is one other way that we can break the Third Commandment and it is a tragic way, when we blame God for the results of our own stupidity and sin. God has left man free in the world. We can do good or we can do evil. And when we do evil, it is man who is to blame, not God.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever noticed the threat that God makes when stating the third commandment?
2. Do you agree that taking any title and/or name that has been given to God in vain is breaking this commandment?
3. Other than using God's name rudely, what other ways can someone take his name in vain?
4. How has taking God's name in vain affected Christianity in a negative way?
5. How can we help each other to make sure that we do not break the third commandment?
6. How can we help each other to spot when a 'leader' is leading them down a false path by using God's name to justify their actions?
7. Why do you think Christians forget about Deuteronomy 18:20, when dealing with some self-proclaimed prophet?
8. What attracts us to false teachers?
9. Do you think that people always know when they are taking God's name in vain?
10. What have been the outcomes that you have witnessed when someone has taking God's name in vain?

