

# The Ten Commandments 3. Do not lift up the name of your God for vain purpose

## Topics

1. The Third Commandment
2. What does it mean to take the name of the Lord God in vain?
3. How far can we take it?
4. How can we lift up the name of the Lord God correctly?
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## 1. The Third Commandment

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 (RSV)

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. (NRSV)

You shall not lift up the name of Adonai your God for vain purpose, for Adonai will not clear one who uses the Name in vain (Broken Tablets)

## 2. What does using God's name "in vain," "for vain purpose" mean?

### 2.1 Definitions. Restating the Commandment

**vain:** dictionary definition:

- 1. having no real value, idle, worthless
- 2. marked by futility or ineffectualness; useless

Thus: do not use God's name:

- in an idle, superfluous way, or
- for a worthless or unworthy purpose, or
- for an unnecessary or futile purpose

A "positive" restatement of the commandment:

we should lift up the name of God only:

- in earnestness, in a full and deep awareness of what we are doing
- for worthy, valuable purposes
- for necessary, fruitful purposes

## 2.2. Examples of Lifting God's Name up in Vain

Examples of lifting up God's name in vain:

- 1. profanity. Dragging God's name through the mud of human emotion.
- 2. false swearing. Swearing to contradict known facts, to deceive
- 3. false prophecy
- 4. "reflex religion" Reflexive use of God's name without a religious commitment (often in a time of need)
- 5. frivolous use of God's name. Exclamations such as "Oh My God," "My Lord!"
- 6. unworthy use of God's name. (e.g. for magic or for destructive purposes)
- 7. unnecessary or unfruitful use of God's name.
  - praying for the sex of an unborn child (The sex of the child is already determined, so the prayer is futile, unnecessary -- unless we are truly praying for a miracle, asking God to miraculously change the sex of our unborn child to the sex we desire)
  - saying a blessing before a meal and then not enjoying the meal
  - swearing before the oblivious or unbelieving

## 3. How Far Can We Take It?

### 3.1 Can we of dust and ashes ever use the transcendent name of God without subtly taking it in vain?

- our finite minds cannot know the fullness of God
- our praise, glorification, exaltation, honoring of God will always fall short of what God is worthy of

We should therefore consider the commandment a:

- gracious permission to use God's name
- a kindness bestowed on us by the One who knows our need to connect God to our lives

This permission however has boundaries.

### 3.2 Is every action of a religious person a reflection on God's name?

If we call ourselves "Christians" and do not act as Christ, are we then taking God's name in vain? Is an offense against the Third commandment also part of our sin?

## 4. How Can We Lift Up the Name of the Lord God Correctly?

We should lift up the name of God only

- in earnestness, in a full and deep awareness of what we are doing
- for worthy, valuable purposes
- for necessary, fruitful purposes

*The basis for this:* the relationship at the heart of the commandment

## 5. The Relationship at the Heart of the Commandment

Our relationship with God involves:

- covenant loyalty
- respect and love (as in any human relationship)

Therefore we should try to lift up God's name:

- respectfully (with holy, awe-filled reverence)
- lovingly

## 6. Implications for Prayer

### 6.1. What the Third Commandment Requires for Prayer

In praying, we are invoking God's name, "lifting up" the name of God.

Third Commandment requires that we pray for:

- worthy, valuable purposes
- necessary, fruitful purposes

we pray with a deep earnestness and honesty:

- no "social duplicity" when we call upon God's name
- words matter, and they matter a lot to God
- must not make God's name a mere breath, an emptiness

### 6.2. Honesty in Prayer

The third commandment in particular calls us to *honesty* in prayer.

Examples of the honesty required in lifting up the name of God:

- The experience of God by Moses, Jeremiah and Daniel
  - *Moses*: God "**great, mighty and awesome**"
  - *Jeremiah*: God "**great and mighty**" (did not experience God as *awesome*)
  - *Daniel*: God "**great and awesome**" (did not experience God as *mighty*)
  - rabbis: Moses is right, but defended Jeremiah and Daniel as being true to their experience of God. They would not lie to the Holy One
- When the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem
  - God seemed mute, seemed to just let it happen
  - Instead of "**Who is like You among the gods (*elim*)**", a rabbi suggested praying "**Who is like You among the mute (*ilemim*)**". Blasphemous? or a deeply honest expression of how the Jews felt at this time?
- Job's curse of his gift of life
  - "**God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb**" (Job 3:3)
  - blasphemous? or a deeply honest expression of how he felt?

To be true to the Third Commandment requires we lift up the name of God only with deep earnestness and honesty. We must not lie to the Holy One. We must not lift up the name of God with adjectives whose meaning is empty to us.

## 7. The Lord Will Not Hold Guiltless Those Who Take His Name in Vain

“ . . . for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (RSV)

Taking God's name in vain may seem like a victimless act. What can we possibly do to harm God?

But consider the relationship at the heart of the commandment. Taking God's name in vain

- may hurt God
- may hurt our relationship with God
- may sully God's reputation and esteem among other people (at the deepest level, the use of God's name is a matter of mission)

## 8. References

- Broken Tablets : Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves.** Ed. by: Rachel S. Mikva. Jewish Lights Pub; Woodstock, Vermont, 1999
- Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments? : A Fresh Look at God's Laws of Love & Changing Perspectives.** John H. Timmerman. Augsburg Fortress. Minneapolis, 1997
- Commandments of Compassion.** James F. Keenan, S.J. Sheed and Ward. Franklin, WI, 1999.