

TAKING THE NAME OF THE LORD IN VAIN
EXODUS 20:7

INTRODUCTION

The country of Iran is much in the news in recent days. For sports fans the focus of interest recently was the US defeat of Iran in the World Cup tournament. For those with interest in Israel and the Middle East the focus is on Iran's support of terror and development of an atomic bomb. For those with interest in liberty and freedom the focus is upon the recent protests and demonstrations in Iran which have resulted from the detention and death of a twenty-two year old woman at the hands of the morality police for not wearing a head covering properly. For Christians the focus of interest is the church in that country which is growing faster than Christianity in any other country in the world.

Unfortunately we Americans are not viewed very favorably by the majority of Iranians. A survey taken in 2019 found that 86% of adults in Iran view the US unfavorably. Almost fifty years ago I had an extended conversation with a fellow in a church that I was attending who had worked for several years in that country. At the time when he was in Iran, the Shah was in power. The US government was supporting him with building projects, military aid, and assistance in developing the nation's oil production. At the height of US involvement in Iran there were about 30,000 Americans who were working in the country.

My church acquaintance pointed out that the Americans who went to Iran to work for the government and for American contractors tended to be single, or to have less attachments to families. Many of them were heavy drinkers, big partiers, drug abusers, and/or women chasers.

In that largely conservative Muslim society these behaviors were not well received. The Shah of Iran was also very dictatorial. He had a secret police force called the SAVAK, which came down hard on anyone who questioned the government. This meant arrests, imprisonment, and torture. Many Iranians grew to hate the Americans who supported this government and brought with them these immoral pursuits. Was it any wonder that when the government was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic government that the US was labeled the Great Satan? The Americans who went to Iran were guilty of blaspheming our country.

We all represent someone or something. It may be a family or a country or a company or a school or an organization or a political viewpoint or a sports team. Whatever or whoever it is, we are representatives. This morning I would like to consider our representation of the God who is there in relationship to the Ten Commandments.

We have finished our series on “The Parables of Jesus.” It has been a while since we have had a sermon series that relates to prophecy. So I thought that I would next do a study of the Book of Daniel. Our attention for the rest of this month will be related to Christmas. So I thought today that I would do a stand-alone message dealing with the Third Commandment.

In 2018 Andy Stanley, the megachurch pastor from Atlanta, published a book entitled *Irresistible*. In it he wrote, “**The Ten Commandments have no authority over you. None. To be clear: Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments.**” That is just wrong. All of the Ten Commandments except one are repeated in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments reveal a lot about who God is and about what He expects of us. I am focusing on the Third Commandment today because I perceive that it is not well understood, and it has something important to teach us.

Our English Standard version (PROJECTOR ON--- EXODUS 20:7 ESV) translates the Third Commandment as recorded in Exodus #20 v. 7 like this: “**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.**” This is very close to the translation which the King James Version provides. The NIV has a slightly different nuance. (EXODUS 20:7 NIV) It translates v. 7 in this way: “**You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.**” There are a number of other translations that also use this verb “misuse.”

I.

Let’s consider first, WHAT DOES THE COMMANDMENT MEAN? (I. WHAT DOES THE COMMANDMENT MEAN?) What was God seeking to tell His people in the Third Commandment?

A.

Here are THE COMMON INTERPRETATIONS of this commandment. (I. WHAT... A. COMMON INTERPRETATIONS) **First**, the commandment has most commonly been understood to prohibit profanity that uses the name of God or of Jesus Christ. God’s people should not use these names in a context of disgust or anger or frustration. This is taking His name in vain.

Second, some have understood this commandment to be a prohibition against false swearing. If someone vows to do something by God or swears by God that something is true, it better be true, or you better do what you swore to do. The Hebrew Bible (EXODUS 20:7--- JEWISH PUBLI. SOCIETY) published by the Jewish Publication Society translates the first part of our verse like this: “**You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God...**”

The Bible does not prohibit swearing in God's name. In Deuteronomy #6 v. 13 (DEUTERONOMY 6:13) the people of God are told, **"It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear."** The point of this verse seems to be that the people of God are supposed to have top allegiance to the God of Israel. They are to worship Him and swear by His name in situations where they are claiming that something is true or where they are promising to do something or are making a covenant with someone.

Centuries later the prophet Isaiah would accuse the Israelites of false swearing, perhaps in violation of this commandment. (ISAIAH 48:1) In Isaiah #48 he declares, **"Hear this, O house of Jacob,/ who are called by the name of Israel,/ and who came from the waters of Judah,/ who swear by the name of the Lord/ and confess the God of Israel,/ but not in truth or right."** The Jews are accused of swearing by God's name that certain things are true, and they are not, or that certain things will happen, and they do not. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A **third** interpretation has been offered by religious Jews that the meaning of this commandment is that the specific name of God used here should not be mispronounced or used in wrong contexts. The name of God that appears here is YHWH. It is the personal name of God that is used to describe the God who has made a sacred covenant with Israel. It is the name of God that the Lord used in telling Moses who He is and what he should say about who has sent him to rescue his people.

Supporters of this viewpoint have pointed to Leviticus #24 v. 16 (PROJECTOR ON--- LEVITICUS 24:16). There the Lord says, **"Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death."** The interpretation suggested is that a Jew must be very careful about using this holy name. To avoid the violation of this prohibition religious Jews today refuse to pronounce the name YHWH. When they see this Hebrew word in the Biblical text, they substitute the word "Adonai," in English "Lord." Sometimes they refer to God as "Hashem," "the Name," instead of YHWH.

A **fourth** interpretation of the Third Commandment suggested by some scholars is that God was seeking to prevent the magical use of His name. In ancient cultures the names of God were used in a magical way in various rituals in an effort to manipulate the gods. The idea was that people should not use the name of God in a magical sense to get God to meet one's own selfish wishes. Some of the prosperity preachers today appear to use God's name in this way.

B.

Before we come to a conclusion about what God specifically meant to convey in the Third Commandment, we need to consider THE MEANING OF THE KEY TERMS in the verse. (I. A. B. THE MEANING OF THE KEY TERMS) There are three of them.

First, consider the word “name.” In Biblical times names were chosen to reflect the character of individuals, the circumstances of their birth, and/or the values of one’s family. Names were not just identification labels. They were statements to the surrounding world. Sometimes names were given to people long after their birth. Thus Jesus gave Simon the name Peter. Joseph was renamed Barnabas by the apostles.

So when the Bible speaks about the names of God, it is referring to much more than an identification label. It is making statements about the character and nature of God. Thus we see in the Bible that God is called the Lord of Hosts and Almighty God and the Most High God and the God Who Sees and Our Father Who Is in Heaven.

In the Third Commandment then we should be suspicious that God is talking about more than just a label for Himself. It is more likely that He is concerned about His character and reputation and nature and total identity. The psalmist is pointing in this direction in Psalm 34 (PSALM 34:3). He writes, **“Oh, magnify the Lord with me,/ and let us exalt his name together!”** Is the psalmist concerned only about a label, about a word? No. He is talking about the person behind the name. He is talking about YHWH, the Lord.

The **second** key term in the commandment is “take” or “misuse.” (PROJECTOR OFF) This is not the primary meaning of the original Hebrew word. The primary meaning of the verb is “to lift, or bear, or carry.”

There is only one other chapter in the Hebrew Bible where both this word and “name” are used together. It is Exodus #28. The chapter is talking about preparations for the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness. God is describing what Aaron, the brother of Moses and the high priest of Israel, is to wear when he enters the tabernacle. He speaks about two onyx stones that have the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on them. (PROJECTOR ON--- EXODUS 28:12) He says, **“And you shall set the two stones on the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel. And Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for remembrance.”** Literal names, or labels, are being described here, but Aaron is functioning as the representative of these names in approaching God.

Later in the chapter (EXODUS 28:29) the two terms appear together again. God says in v. 29, **“So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart, when he goes into the Holy Place, to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord.”**

So more accurately the Lord in the Third Commandment is talking about bearing, or carrying, the name of the Lord in vain. The **third** term to consider is “in vain.” What does “in vain” mean? (PROJECTOR OFF) The original Hebrew word means “for nothing, worthlessly, futilely.” In the Old Testament it may be used of something that is physically worthless or of no value, or of something that is morally worthless or empty. The term appears in Psalm 24. The psalmist (PROJECTOR ON--- PSALM 24:3-4) in vv. 3 & 4 writes, **“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?/ And who shall stand in his holy**

place?/ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,/ who does not lift up his soul to what is false [It is the Hebrew word for 'vanity']/ and does not swear deceitfully. By virtue of the parallelism with "swear deceitfully" we may understand this lifting up of the soul to vanity as referring to falsehood, to lying.

In other places in the Old Testament the word is used to describe idols. Sometimes it is used to describe false prophets and their words that really do not come from God. In putting the meaning of these three terms together we are moving in the direction of understanding our Third Commandment to be talking about bearing the name and reputation of God in an inappropriate way in a way that diminishes the reputation of God.

C.

(I. A. B. C. THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND) Consider for a few moments THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND for the Third Commandment. In the Ancient Near East slaves were branded by their owners. Archaeologists find examples of this in Assyria and Babylon and Mesopotamia. In a place called Borsippa slaves of the Babylonian god Marduk were branded on their wrists with images of a spade that was associated with Marduk. Slaves of the Babylonian moon god Nabu were branded with a reed stylus on their wrists.

Israel emerged as a nation out of Egypt in the 15th century before Christ. Personal slaves there were also marked with the name of their owners. (EGYPTIAN BRANDING IRON) This is a brass Egyptian branding iron, now at the British Museum, believed to have come from this general era. The archaeologists think that it is too small to have been used on cattle. More likely it was used on slaves. The Hebrews before their exit from Egypt were treated as slaves of the Pharaoh. We don't know if they had brands indicating that. But the Hebrews were certainly familiar with the practice.

Centuries later the prophet Isaiah would say (ISAIAH 44:5), speaking about a time in the distant future, **"This one will say, 'I am the Lord's,'/ another will call on the name of Jacob,/ and another will write on his hand, 'The Lord's,'/ and name himself by the name of Israel."** The issue again is ownership.

The Ten Commandments were given by God shortly after the Hebrews escaped from their slavery in Egypt. The Lord miraculously intervened to free them from their bondage to the Pharaoh and to the Egyptian government. At Mt. Sinai God made a covenant with the Hebrews. He promised them a much better deal than what they had received in Egypt. If they would follow his commands, they would enjoy prosperity and good health and victory over enemies.

(DEUTERONOMY 26:18) In Deuteronomy #28 Moses says, **"And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, (DEUTERONOMY 26:19) and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your**

God, as he promised.” Because Israel now has a privileged position, because these people are now identified with the one true God, the God of the universe, they have a responsibility not to bear His name in vain.

(DEUTERONOMY 28:9) In Deuteronomy #28 Moses also says, **“The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways. (DEUTERONOMY 28:10) And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you.”**

The Hebrews now bear His name. They are His representatives. Because of God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery and because of the covenant that He established at Mt. Sinai with Israel, that nation has a privileged position. The Hebrews are identified with a new master, a gracious and powerful master. The sign of commitment to this master is observance of the Sabbath. This is also one of the Ten Commandments, and obedience to it is a sign of commitment to the covenant and to YHWH.

Israel agreed to follow this covenant at Mt. Sinai. The Ten Commandments were part of the agreement. Just before God began to list the Ten Commandments (EXODUS 20:2) He declared, **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** Then follows the command not to have any other gods and the command not to make idols and then the Third Commandment. Notice that it is deliverance which comes first and then comes the call to obedience. It is not obedience which produces deliverance. Deliverance comes from God’s grace. It is obedience to the Law which is the proper response to the appreciation of deliverance and the wonderful display of God’s grace.

That is how our salvation works, Our sins are forgiven and we are given eternal life as a result of trusting in Jesus. The Apostle Paul explains that this is a gift. It is nothing which we can earn. (Ephesians 2:8) It can only be received by faith. The object of that faith is Jesus, the God-man who died on the cross and rose again from the dead. Our responsibility is to welcome Him into our lives.

D.

Consider then Letter D in the outline, ITS INTENDED MEANING FOR ISRAEL. (I. A. B. C. D. ITS INTENDED MEANING FOR ISRAEL) What was the intended meaning for the Hebrews? My interpretation is that the commandment meant that the Hebrews were not to bear the name of the Lord wrongly or inappropriately, in a way that diminishes the reputation of God. By their actions the Hebrews were to preserve the good reputation of YHWH. If and when they failed to do that, they could expect the negative consequences outlined in the covenant established at Mt. Sinai.

What kinds of behavior were a violation of this commandment? In Leviticus #18 (LEVITICUS 18:21) the Lord tells Moses, **“You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.”**

Molech was the god of the Ammonites. Worship of Molech involved having a son killed as an offering to him. This worship of false gods and killing of a son was a violation of

the Third Commandment. Today children in the womb are offered to the god of autonomy, the god of humanism, the god of doing with my life what I want. Having a baby in the womb killed is all about serving me or the male who fathered the child.

Centuries later the prophet Ezekiel complains about the waywardness of the nation of Judah. (EZEKIEL 43:8B) In Ezekiel #43 the Lord declares, **“They have defiled my holy name by their abominations that they have committed, so I have consumed them in my anger.”**

The southern kingdom of Judah has violated the Third Commandment. The list of abominations is long. Ezekiel points out that the Jews have been guilty of idol worship, failure to observe the Sabbath, immorality, injustice, unresponsiveness to God’s prophets. The consequences of violation of this commandment are being carried out. They are not left unpunished who bear His name worthlessly. The Babylonians have overrun Judah, killed thousands of people, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and sent others into exile.

Leviticus #24 describes another violation of this commandment. (LEVITICUS 24:11) The narrator tells us, **“...and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses...”** Apparently this individual swore and used the name of YHWH in a situation of profanity. This was witnessed by others. The situation was brought before God, and He commanded that this offender be stoned to death. Using the name of God in this way was regarded as a violation of this commandment. So speaking the name of God or Jesus in a profane way is and was a violation of this commandment. But by the earlier examples we see that the intended meaning of the commandment was broader than just the inappropriate use of God’s name. It applied to behavior that was inappropriate for one who bears the name of the true God.

II.

Consider then HOW SHOULD THE COMMANDMENT BE APPLIED TODAY? (II. HOW SHOULD THE COMMANDMENT BE APPLIED TODAY?) It seems to me that there are at least five specific applications that we Christians can make in terms of how we should obey the Third Commandment today.

A.

First, WE SHOULD NOT SPEAK THE NAME OF GOD OR JESUS CHRIST INAPPROPRIATELY. (II. A. WE SHOULD NOT SPEAK...) We should not speak His name in situations of anger or disgust or frustration. We should not treat His name as a swear word. Too often I hear Christians do this. It isn’t treating God as holy to use His name inappropriately.

B.

Second, VOWS MADE IN GOD'S NAME SHOULD BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. (II. A. B. VOWS MADE IN GOD'S...) When we swear by God to tell the truth, we better tell the truth. When we vow by God to do something, we better follow through on our commitment.

C.

Third, it seems to me that WE NEED TO BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT THE CASUAL USE OF GOD IN GIVING CREDIT OR BLAME. (II. A. B. C. WE NEED TO BE CAUTIOUS...) Sometimes we blame God for things which are the result of our own foolish or sinful decisions. Sometimes we claim that God led us in certain directions when it is doubtful that He did.

I had a Christian friend who said that the Lord led he and his wife into a business venture. It sounded to me like it was an unwise decision which they made. I wasn't surprised when it didn't last long and went under financially. Was God really leading this couple in that direction, or were they just making an unwise business decision? Perhaps God was being blamed for something that He did not do. The sovereign God obviously allowed it, but it may not have been the Holy Spirit leading them in that direction.

D.

Fourth, TEACHING FALSE DOCTRINE IS A VIOLATION OF THE COMMANDMENT. (II. A. B. C. D. TEACHING FALSE DOCTRINE IS...) If the heart of the Third Commandment involves misrepresenting the God who is really there, then teaching things about Him that are not true is really bad. It is blasphemy. There are secondary matters of Biblical doctrine over which Christians may disagree. That is OK. But when it comes to foundational doctrines like the authority of the Bible, the Trinity, the identity of Jesus Christ, the reality of sin, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus, and the hope of the Second Coming we have to get it right. Anything less is blasphemy.

Some of the prosperity teachers preach blasphemous things. Consider these quotations from just one prosperity teacher, Kenneth Copeland: **"When I read in the Bible where he [Jesus] says, 'I Am,' I just smile and say, 'Yes, I am, too!'"** (*The Force of Love*, 1987) **"You don't have a god in you, you are one."** (*The Force of Love*) Or how about this: **"You are as much the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ was. Every man who has been born again is an incarnation."** (Inspiring Quotes.us) These claims are blasphemy. Though we might want to be God, and though we sometimes act like we are, we humans are not God.

E.

Fifth, DISHONORING GOD IS A VIOLATION OF THE COMMANDMENT. (II. A. B. C. D. E. DISHONORING GOD IS A...) When we act contrary to His standards in our speech, in our behavior, and in our attitude, we are bearing His name wrongly. We are representing Him in a bad way.

The behavior of many Americans in Iran in the 1970s was a blasphemy of America. Too many of the Americans who worked there represented our country poorly. In contrast to that when the US got involved in WWII and joined the attack to free Europe of Nazism, it was generally recognized that our troops represented our country well. Many Americans sacrificed their lives to defeat the Nazis. Today there are American cemeteries scattered around Europe which are maintained by Europeans who continue to appreciate what our country did in freeing them from tyranny.

All of us represent something or someone. We represent country or family or school or community or political party or company. For those of us who call ourselves Christians the most important One whom we represent is Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians #1 the Apostle Paul tells Christians, **“He [God the Father] predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will...”** When we trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are adopted into God’s family. We take on our Father’s name. We need to represent Him well.

In Acts #2 the author Luke is describing the reaction that Jewish people have to Peter’s preaching on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. The text says in v. 38, **“Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”** In the act of water baptism Christians publicly identify with Jesus Christ. In a sense we take on His name. We are not to bear that name inappropriately.

In Colossians 3:17 the New Testament tells us, **“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”** As Christians we bear the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our responsibility is to honor Him in all that we do. We are responsible to do this corporately and individually. We will never do that perfectly this side of heaven. We will always need God’s grace. Part of bearing God’s name means showing this grace to others.

We seek to do this as a local church. We have church people who go into jails and prisons to lead Bible studies. We have people who teach an after school club at the public elementary school. We have someone who leads a service at the local nursing homes. As a church we give sacrificially to support representatives of the true God in other lands. We help to support Joanna Beeler who delivers babies in a country lacking medical care and among a people who are often antagonistic to the God of the Bible. She represents us and God well.

We also have an individual responsibility to honor God. All of us are sinners, and we will do this imperfectly. But we need to be aware that in our words and deeds and attitudes we represent Jesus Christ. We reflect our allegiance in the quality of the work that we do on the job and at school. We do that when we speak in community organizations and when we talk to our neighbors. We represent God in our political involvements, which is difficult in the divided environment in which we live.

In our older congregation we are not strangers to health challenges and to death. But death happens even to younger people. This week we grieved with Nate and Sandy over the loss of their daughter. Clive lost his brother to death this week. We find in the gospels that Jesus expressed grief over pain and loss to others and to the prospect of His own painful death. But he and we can do this with hope. Even in the midst of major challenges we represent the God who is really there.

The challenge from the Third Commandment is not to bear the name of the God we represent badly. The Apostle Paul leaves us with the New Testament version of that challenge. He writes in Colossians #3 v. 17, **“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”**