Daily Verse and Comment

Exodus 20:7

(7) 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.

King James Version

This commandment, like the second, includes a warning within it. What does He mean by "not hold him guiltless"? Sometimes God deliberately understates a warning as a subtle form of emphasis, which ultimately magnifies its meaning. The penalty for taking God's name in vain is *death*!

It is helpful to define four words used in this command:

» *Take* : Several Hebrew words are translated into the English word "take," but this one means "lift up," "bear," "carry," "use," "appropriate."

» *Name* : The Hebrew root denotes something high or elevated, a monument implying majesty or excellence. It is an outstanding mark, sign, or reputation. Thus "name" is a word by which a person, place, or thing is distinctively known. A name identifies, signifies, and specifies.

» *Vain* : The underlying Hebrew word suggests emptiness, futility, and/or falsehood. It implies lacking in reality, value, or truth. Its single-word synonyms—depending upon the context—are "futile," "worthless," "profane," "foolish," "reproachful," "curse," "blaspheme," "purposeless," "useless," "inconsequential," "unsubstantial," and "vaporous."

» *Guiltless* : This word indicates "free," "clear," "innocent," "clean," "blameless," "unpunished."

This commandment has nothing to do with the proper pronunciation of God's name, which no one knows for certain how to say anyway. It also has nothing to do with superstition or magic. This commandment's application is much broader, deeper, and more dignified than that.

This commandment is certainly against common swearing, including the use of euphemisms so common in this Protestant society, examples of which are "gee," "gosh," "golly," "cheese and rice," "got all muddy," "jiminy cricket," and "doggone." However, it also includes the light or disrespectful *use* of any of God's attributes or character traits. More directly than any other, the third commandment teaches how much God is to be a part of our every word, deed, and attitude.

It pays dividends in insight and understanding to take notice of biblical names. In biblical thought, a name is not merely a label of identification but also an expression of the bearer's essential nature. It includes its bearer's reputation, character, and distinctiveness from others. For example, in all probability Adam named the beasts based on his observations of the distinctiveness of their natures. Similarly, to know the name of God is to know God as He has revealed Himself, that is, to know some of His nature.

This same thought is true of many biblical characters, providing insight into understanding them within the events recorded about them. To illustrate, Jacob supplants his brother Esau twice. A supplanter is one who by skill, deceit, or force takes the place of another. When this happens the second time, Esau says, "Is he not rightly named Jacob?" (Genesis 27:36). Regarding the birthright and blessing, Jacob takes Esau's place using his supplanting nature.

Another clear example occurs when Abigail pleads with David for Nabal's life: "As his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him!" (I Samuel 25:25). *Nabal* means "a dolt, a vile person." Thus, the Bible shows that a name tends to exercise constraint on a person to conform to its nature.

In Hebrew thought, then, a name is inextricably bound with the named thing's existence. Nothing exists unless it has a name, and its essence is concentrated in its name. Hence, creation is not complete until Adam names

all the creatures. To cut off a person's name is to end the bearer's existence, or to change a person's name is to indicate a shift in his character and standing before God.

To speak or act in another's name is to act as that person's agent and to participate in his authority. To be called by another's name implies that person's ownership, and one bearing that name falls under the authority and protection of the one whose name is called upon.

The third commandment sets the standard of the spiritual cleanliness in a person using the name of God because it is so weighty. It must be used or borne in truth, without hypocrisy or vanity but in purity of conduct. A person is better off being sincerely wrong than being a professing Christian and denying God's name by the conduct of his life.

Consider that to help us to know David, the Bible shows him as shepherd, warrior, king, prophet, poet, husband, father, musician, sinner, and penitent—each part of a rich and varied nature. Yet, God is manifold times greater than David! The Bible reveals Him, His nature, in a similar way, by adding names to aid us in identifying His many glorious characteristics. God names Himself what He is, just as He names people what they are. Thus, Jacob is at first a supplanter, yet when he changes, God names him more appropriately for his new life. *Israel* is "one who prevails with God."

Herbert Lockyer's book, *All the Divine Names and Titles,* lists 364 names and titles for Jesus Christ alone. Through His names and titles, God has chosen to reveal a great deal about His attributes, offices, authority, prerogatives, and will. Each name designates some distinct virtue or characteristic of God's nature. Thus, God has made known the glory of His nature through His names. They are not to be abused.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:
The Third Commandment

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