



"Example is always more efficacious than precept."  
—Samuel Johnson

**11-Jun-21**

## **Taking God's Name in Vain**

Mother gave Jimmy a hard look. "That's the fourth time I've heard you swear today! What's gotten into you, boy? Must I get the swear jar out again?"

"What did I do, Ma?" Jimmy protested. "All I said was, 'OMG'! The kids say it all the time at school. What's so bad about that?"

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times!" Mother answered with a sigh. "OMG stands for 'Oh, my God,' and when you say that, you take the Lord's name in vain! It breaks one of the Ten Commandments! I don't want to hear you use that kind of language again!"

How many times has a similar conversation happened in Christian homes around [the world](#)? With the sordid language used in both public and private these days, it is a conversation that is probably taking place a lot less now than it did even a decade or two ago. People feel free to fling profanities around like a wet dog slings water from its coat.

The conversation above sadly reflects the extent of most people's understanding of the third of God's Ten Commandments, "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" ([Exodus 20:7](#)). The standard explanation prohibits the careless speaking of God's name in an oath or profanity.

While it *does* forbid using God's name in a cavalier or degrading manner, the third commandment has a far deeper meaning to those who have made the covenant with God. He certainly does not want us attaching His holy name to words that diminish His glory and honor, but His prohibition against taking His name in vain covers a broad array of words *and* behaviors that reflect negatively upon Him. This third commandment, often downplayed as one of the least of the Ten, is conversely among the most significant, bridging the commands forbidding idolatry (highlighting God's uniqueness, [holiness](#), and worth) and the later ones proscribing unrighteous behaviors.

Understanding the commandment hinges on our grasping the significance of three words: "take," "name," and "vain." The first is a common verb, the second is a common noun, and the third is a reasonably uncommon adjective. A problem arises when we assign ordinary meanings to terms because we think we already know what they mean. This practice becomes especially misguided when we do it in translating from one language to another.

Consider "take," for instance. Dictionaries list nearly a hundred shades of meanings under its verb form alone, from "to get into one's possession by voluntary action" (take a drink from the refrigerator) to "to admit of being moved or separated" (the mower takes apart for storage). In the phrase "take in vain," we probably assume *take* means "to use or employ" or "to deal with; treat." These are not wrong meanings to imply, but a quick study of the Hebrew term gives us a fuller, more concrete sense.

Underneath "take" in the third commandment is the Hebrew verb *n'* (*Strong's* #5375), which means "to lift, to carry, to take away." It can also mean "to raise high" or "to bear." The first use of this word in Scripture appears in [Genesis 4:13](#), where Cain complains to God, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" What this example connotes fits the scope of the third commandment better than even "use" or "employ." God is concerned about how we carry or bear His name in all our everyday activities, not just in piques of temper or casual conversations.

"Name" is another common word in our language, and it means essentially the same in Hebrew as it does in English: A name is a word or phrase by which a thing is known or identified. In Hebrew, the word is *shem* (*Strong's* #8034), meaning "name; reputation; memory; renown." When *shem* refers to God's names, though, the meaning elevates above mere identification to a revelation of His character and behavior. It goes beyond reputation or renown to the reality of who and what He is and does as the holy God.

The classic revelation of God's names appears in Exodus 34, after [Moses](#) asks Him to show him His glory. While God allowed His prophet to see His back (no human can see the glory of His face and live), He "proclaimed the name of the LORD" as He passed by ([Exodus 34:5](#)):

The LORD, the LORD God, [merciful](#) and gracious, [longsuffering](#), and abounding in [goodness](#) and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and [sin](#), by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation. ([Exodus 34:6-7](#))

In so many words, He instructs Moses in these specific aspects of His character. His names reflect or express His essential Being. So, when God charges us about bearing His name in our daily lives, He speaks about the quality of our example of godliness before those we encounter. The third commandment is all about making a righteous witness to others!

Finally, the adjective "vain" often describes vanity: pride, arrogance, conceit, self-importance. It brings to mind Carly Simon's 1972 hit, "You're So Vain," about a man who is so self-centered that he even thinks her disparaging song is all about him! However, the third commandment is not about bearing God's name in a proud or conceited way.

Another meaning of *vain*, especially in the phrase "in vain," is "futile." This definition is more in line with the meaning of the Hebrew word in [Exodus 20:7](#), *šhw'* (*Strong's* #7723). Its basic meaning is "deceit; lie; falsehood." As all lies and deceptions are in fact empty words, truthless, and unreal, *šhw'* also implies "emptiness," "worthlessness," and "vanity." So, God forbids His

people, those called by His name, from speaking or acting in a way that deceives others about or devalues the great God Himself or His holy, righteous character.

We can better understand its application in the commandment by considering it from its opposite side: God wants His people, those who have made the covenant with Him, to express the truth about Him and His way in every thought, word, and behavior ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#); [Colossians 3:17](#)). The third commandment requires Christians to bear God's name (see [Matthew 28:19](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [8:16](#); [10:48](#); [19:5](#); etc.) in a worthy manner, one that speaks and models the truth about God and His righteousness.

Sure, the third commandment covers spewing profanities, which degrade and blaspheme God and His name. But it means so much more, binding His people to an extremely high standard of conduct in which their every activity brings glory and honor to the Most High God.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Holiness \(Part 1\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Taking God's name in vain is far more serious than swearing or profanity. To appropriate the name of God means to represent His attributes, character and nature. God's names are the signposts or revelators of His nature and descriptors of His activities. The glory of God was revealed through Christ by what He said and did- His entire repertoire of behavior. Our daily behavior, likewise, must imitate Christ just as Christ's behavior revealed God the Father. Behaving in a Godly manner enables us to know God and live a quality life. The third commandment has to do with the quality of our personal witness to everything the name we bear implies. Profaning or blaspheming God's name implies living in a manner inconsistent with God's name.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[The Third Commandment](#)**

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The third commandment seems greatly overshadowed by "bigger" ones like the first, second, and fourth. Yet, despite the common understanding that it merely prohibits profane speech, John Ritenbaugh contends that it is far more—to the point that it regulates the purity and quality of our worship of the great God.

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