

TAKING GOD'S NAME IN VAIN

by R H Johnston

This paper discusses what it means to "take God's name in vain", as revealed in the Third Commandment and related scriptures.

THE NATURE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The ten commandments are presented in the form of a Hittite treaty. When they had conquered another nation, and made its people their slaves, the Hittites compelled them to accept terms in the form of a treaty like the ten commandments. In these "covenant of slavery" treaties, the conquering king opened the treaty statement by saying what he had done for the country which he had conquered (compare Exodus 20:2). Following that, a series of conditions were laid out which the slave people were to obey, and which defined the nature of their relationship to the conquering king. The ten commandments can thus be seen as the conditions which God laid upon His slave people Israel.

Paul confirms that the Old Covenant was indeed a covenant of slavery in Galatians 4:24. By contrast, he tells us in Galatians 4:31-5:1 that we Christians are not children of the slave, but of the free woman (who is the symbol of the New Covenant): "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1).

In spite of the fact that, as Christians, we are not under this law, useful lessons may be learned from it, since it is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Galatians 3:24), given to reveal our deficiencies in the sight of God.

WHAT DOES "TAKING GOD'S NAME IN VAIN" MEAN?

Of all the commandments, the third is probably the most difficult to understand today, because to "take someone's name in vain" is not a familiar idea in everyday use. There are in fact two unfamiliar ideas.

Firstly the use of someone else's "name". This is to use or rely upon someone else's **authority**. We shall expand on this later, but it is worth noting in passing that insurance policies sometimes include a clause which enables the insurer to undertake litigation "in the name" of the person insured. What this means is that the insurer can take a case to court as if they were the insured.

The second unfamiliar idea is taking that name "in vain". The Hebrew word for "in vain" may equally well be translated "in falsehood". Hence the text of Exodus 20:7 becomes: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in **falsehood**; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name **in**

falsehood". This is clearer in meaning than the words "in vain", and begins to reveal a wide application.

The Old Covenant: swearing must be true

The use of God's name in swearing by God's name, implicit in Exodus 20:7, is made explicit in Leviticus 19:12: "And you shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD" - the Living One who sees what is happening and judges. People forget that God sees all, and think it does not really matter if they tell lies. But God will not hold such people guiltless: He will exercise vengeance (Hebrews 10:30). False swearers will come under judgement, and swiftly (Malachi 3:5).

Hebrews 6:16 tells us that "Men swear by a greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation". This has been common practice throughout the ages. The idea is that if you invoke someone greater and more powerful than you, that person becomes responsible for ensuring you carry out your oath. It relies on the fearful prospect that the greater person will bring you to justice and punish you if you default on your oath, because you have damaged his reputation, by swearing an oath falsely (by using his name in connection with something which is not fulfilled). Not only will the greater person punish you, but he also acts as a guarantor who will perform the oath in order to clear his own name. Exodus 20:7 makes it clear that the LORD will step in with judgement if He is brought into disrepute in this way. The third commandment is a reminder to Israel not to abuse the privilege of being allowed to use God's name as a surety - in the contemporary treaties, the people were permitted to swear by the name of the king.

(A modern situation which may illustrate the idea is that sometimes, before a mortgage is granted to a person of doubtful financial standing, someone else of better standing must stand as a surety for the mortgage, and will be liable to pay if the mortgagee defaults. The person who stands surety must then obtain his own redress from the defaulter.)

The use of God's name and swearing by it is closely connected to vowing vows: Numbers 30:2 "When a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word." Since all vows must be fulfilled, it is much better not to vow than undertake a risky vow that may prove impossible to perform (Deuteronomy 23:21-23).

The New Covenant: do not swear at all

The Old Testament permitted His people to use His name in oaths, but God was very jealous about the way His name was used. The situation changes in the New

Testament, and the use of God's name in this way is no longer permitted, because we inevitably abuse the privilege. Matthew 5:33-37 states:

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil. (Revised Standard Version)

This passage shows that the use of anything more than straight 'yes' or 'no' is a pretty sure sign that we are not acting honestly. It is common experience that people feel the need to add oaths in God's name or Jesus' name to what they say only when what they are saying is **not** true, to give it a spurious authority.

The outstanding example of this is Peter's third denial in Matthew 26:74, when Peter invoked a curse on himself, and swore that he did not know Jesus in the courtyard of the temple during Jesus' trial for His life.

Another reason for not binding oneself by swearing in this way is that it may prove impossible to fulfil what has been sworn because the matter turns out to be beyond our power (James 4:14-15). We will then have unwittingly incurred guilt. This seems to be the particular thrust of Matthew 5:36, and this is confirmed by the parallel passage in James 5:12.

Oaths can lead to immoral acts. It was because of an oath that Herod had John the Baptist beheaded: Herod was unable to go back on his word even though he wished to (Matthew 14:7-10, especially v9). Jephthah likewise regretted his oath (Judges 11:35-36).

MISREPRESENTING GOD

Not "swearing" or "cursing" is about as far as most people's understanding of the third commandment reaches. But there are more subtle ways to abuse the name of our Lord GOD, equally dangerous, which the Christian is perhaps more likely to commit.

For instance, Ezekiel 13:1-16 reveals that God will judge those who misrepresent him, and who claim to be speaking for Him (i.e. "in His name") when they are not speaking His Word:

13:₁ The word of the LORD came to me: ₂ "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel, prophesy and say to those who

prophesy out of their own minds: 'Hear the word of the LORD!' ³ Thus says the Lord GOD, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! ⁴ Your prophets have been like foxes among ruins, O Israel. ⁵ You have not gone up into the breaches, or built up a wall for the house of Israel, that it might stand in battle in the day of the LORD. ⁶ They have spoken falsehood and divined a lie; they say, 'Says the LORD,' when the LORD has **not sent** them, and **yet they expect him to fulfil their word.** ⁷ Have you not seen a delusive vision, and uttered a lying divination [*e.g. Jeremiah 7:4*], whenever you have said, 'Says the LORD,' although I have **not spoken**?"

⁸ Therefore thus says the Lord God: "Because you have uttered delusions and seen lies, therefore behold, I am against you, says the Lord GOD. ⁹ My hand will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and who give lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD. ¹⁰ Because, yea, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace [*With the result that people complain against God, saying "Why didn't you tell us?"*],' when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets daub it with whitewash; ¹¹ say to those who daub it with whitewash that it shall fall! There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind break out; ¹² and when the wall falls, will it not be said to you, 'Where is the daubing with which you daubed it?' ¹³ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: I will make a stormy wind break out in my wrath; and there shall be a deluge of rain in my anger, and great hailstones in wrath to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I will break down the wall that you have daubed with whitewash, and bring it down to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare; when it falls, you shall perish in the midst of it; and you shall know that I am the LORD. ¹⁵ Thus will I spend my wrath upon the wall, and upon those who have daubed it with whitewash; and I will say to you, The wall is no more, nor those who daubed it, ¹⁶ the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her, when there was no peace, says the Lord GOD." (Revised Standard Version)

Similar messages are at Jeremiah 14:14-16 and Jeremiah 29:21-23.

Misrepresentation through systematic theology

Very often, the misrepresentation of God is subtle. Christians can easily transgress by perverting the Word of God by the way they systematise it, just like

the Pharisees: Matthew 15:1-9, particularly verses 7-9: "You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said: `This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain" - or "falsely" - "do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men"'.

The reason the Pharisees misrepresented God comes out in Matthew 15:6: "so for the sake of your **tradition**, you have made void the Word of God". Christian may do this by so exalting some doctrinal system, that he ends up fitting the Scriptures around the system, rather than accepting what the Word itself says. All doctrinal systems have been made by men - and so are "a precept of men".

Doctrinal systems tend to lock people in to their existing prejudices and experience or lack of experience. If certain scriptural experiences were lacking at the time the system was developed, the system may declare that such experiences, though described in Scripture, cannot happen today. For example, some systems assert that certain church ministries died with the Twelve, yet the Scriptures say nothing about their cessation. In such a case we risk adjusting our interpretation of scripture to fit the theological system rather than conforming it to God's mind revealed in Scripture (Romans 12:2). We then go on to misrepresent God and His Word to others, imperilling their souls (Matthew 23:15).

Misrepresentation through the limitation of our experience

Many Christians cannot conceive of God acting in ways which go beyond, or are different from, their own experience. They may be tempted to believe that what is outside their own experience is not of God, or that other people must experience God in exactly the same way as themselves. In so doing, they limit God's power to their experience, and so misrepresent his character. Non- Christians similarly transgress through the limitations of their experience and understanding when they say, "If God were a God of Love, He would....". In so doing they misrepresent and belittle His character.

We may be unaware we are misrepresenting God

Until Jesus told them so forcefully, the Pharisees were unaware that they were misrepresenting God. They studied the Bible and tried to keep the law scrupulously - as they understood it. But they had undermined God's command to honour father and mother. Likewise, if we are misrepresenting God we may be unaware of it, and think we are right. How much we need to see things as God does, and make sure that we regard nothing as more important than the Word of God, just as it is, without reinterpretation.

If we are going to say that God has said a certain thing, we must be sure that He really has done so. We can only speak safely as representing God when we truly know His mind on a subject. Then we can speak "in His name".

No-one can speak for someone else unless they know that person's views, and he must be continually wary of misrepresentation. Suppose I send you as a delegate for me to a meeting I cannot attend. You are to speak on my behalf, and what you say will have the same impact as if I had spoken. If you go to the meeting and say what you want to say, taking no account of what I intended you to say, then you take my name in vain. There are two ways this can happen. You may know what I want to say, and you deliberately decide to ignore my opinions, and put over your own views. The second way you might abuse my trust is by never finding out what I want to say, or by misunderstanding it. This could happen if you go to the meeting without finding out what I want you to say. Whatever the reasons for your misrepresenting me, I will be justifiably angry when I find out.

It is very easy for us to do this with God, misrepresenting Him before men, by speaking from our own minds and hearts like the false prophets denounced by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, above.

Misrepresenting God can lead to the unforgivable sin

Misrepresenting God can lead us to the unforgivable sin which is "Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 12:22-32, especially verse 31). Jesus had done a mighty work, and people said these works were of the Devil. The word "blasphemy" is "to speak injuriously against": this happens when someone declares that works that were in fact done by the Holy Spirit were the work of the Devil. Such an attitude is by its inherent nature unforgivable, because it cuts off the possibility of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, at least in that area. We should be very sure of God's mind before condemning any work as being of the Devil: to do so wrongly is to take the Lord's name in vain.

Deliverance from misrepresenting God

All of the above shows our need to know the Lord's mind, so that we can deal with these things, with authority. It takes time to know God's mind.

Until we are certain of God's mind, we do well not to be dogmatic: it is safer to admit our ignorance, and that we may be wrong. Our present knowledge is always partial (1 Corinthians 13:9), limited by our own experience, previous teaching etc.. We need to learn from each other in humility, recognising that there may be whole areas of spiritual understanding which God has not yet revealed to us.

We must avoid resisting the Spirit if He seeks to liberate us from a rigid doctrinal system which is too small for God. It is essential to love Truth above anything else, particularly established evangelical thought, and the fear of man, which scripture describes as a snare. We must be prepared allow God to put His blue pencil through anything we may previously have believed.

How can we know God's mind?

James 1:5 says that if we lack wisdom, we are to ask God for it, expecting to receive it from Him. God is much more willing to let us know how to pray and act than we are to ask.

Jeremiah 23:18,22 even points a way through for people who would otherwise be false prophets! The picture is of a king seated with his counsellors standing about him, just standing waiting for the king's instructions, which they would then proceed to carry out. Likewise we must first wait for God to speak to us, so that we may know and declare His mind to the people. Then we can be sure of avoiding the judgement meted out to the false prophets who dared to misrepresent God, by speaking out their own opinions.

The fear of the LORD will preserve us from all presumption, and for speaking when the LORD has not spoken. If we are fully aware of Who the LORD is, we will not break this commandment.

THE USE OF JESUS'S NAME

Jesus gave His disciples the privilege of asking in Jesus' name (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-26), and promised to answer. Some believe this gives an "open cheque" with God, but their failures prove that this is not so.

To pray "in Jesus' name", or do miracles "in Jesus' name", if Jesus has not sanctioned it is a presumption which will be judged: Matthew 7:21-23:

²¹ "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.' (Revised Standard Version)

This passage shows it is possible to do miracles and pray in Jesus' name deceitfully, without His authority. (Usually this happens when people want to establish themselves in the eyes of God and men, and this is appealing to the flesh (Luke 10:20).) We must be sure that Jesus wants us to pray or do the thing

in question. To append "in Jesus' name" as a rubber stamp signature dishonours God, and brings judgement - even if the works are successful. Cults, the occult, and in particular the so-called "white" magic, which use Jesus' name as an automatic formula, are good examples of this way of taking God's name in vain. Indeed any "formula" use of Jesus' name is essentially occult, which accounts for Jesus describing such people as "evil-doers" (Matthew 7:23).

The reason why God allows success to the people doing the above works is to save the reputation of His name with outsiders. A comparable situation arises in business law. Although a Company may legally only undertake business which is allowed by its "Articles of Association", if it enters a contract which lies outside what is permitted, the other party may still enforce the contract. But those responsible within the company may be personally liable for any losses.

As Christians, though, our prayers may not be answered until we have properly understood what it is that Jesus wants us to pray for. If we seek things from God for ourselves, God may refuse to answer our prayers while we are praying the wrong way, even, or perhaps especially, if we append "in Jesus name" to the prayer. The Father will ask Jesus if He has told us to pray for this thing, and if Jesus denies it, the Father will not answer us, even if the Father wants to give us even more than we are asking for! Father considers it more important that we should learn to pray aright in Jesus' name, really knowing what Jesus would have us pray for.

We should only invoke God's name, or append Jesus' name to our prayers and works when we know that what we seek or do is in line with God's mind.

These notes (v1 9.5 1994, v2 2.9.2018) are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk)

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