

Exodus 20:7

7You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

(Drop Papers)

Ever hear someone drop something, break something, spill something, or ruin something, and a few choice curse words spewed in anger come out with God or Jesus, or Jesus Christ as a part of those words? Most of us monitor our use of these words, mainly because of this commandment that we have known since childhood. But sometimes some of us slip, and there are folks all around us who don't care what they say. Foul language abounds in many circles, even on TV, with the hot mike picking up on field comments from professional athletes.

One thing I grew up thinking is that the third commandment was all about cussing. I was partly wrong; it is about swearing and so much more.

Another thing I grew up with is the courtroom drama, Perry Mason, especially, where people swear on the Bible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God. So, I knew there was a little more to it than not cussing. I knew that when I wanted to emphasize that I was speaking the truth, I would swear to God as an assertion that I was telling the truth. To swear to God added emphasis to the statement and ensured the declaration was the truth.

In Scripture, the Jewish people took this commandment so seriously that they would not pronounce the name of God, even though the Lord revealed it to the people at creation, and many times since. The name God gave to people was I AM, which is expressed as "The LORD," in Scripture. This occurs over 6,000 times in the Bible, more than all other names combined. They feared even saying God's name, for it might violate this commandment. I will honor that tradition and do what they did; they used Adonai, and I will use LORD to represent the name God has entrusted to us. We often see that the word is capitalized in Scripture. That emphasizes that it means the name God gave to us without profaning the actual Hebrew word for God.

The heart of the commandment is don't use the LORD's name as if it has no significance or don't use it lightly, which includes cursing, but so much more. Even the innocuous and almost vanished "OMG" or "O my God" falls into this category. These things treat the LORD'S name as something that doesn't matter at all. And for the Hebrew people, it mattered greatly as it does for us. It shows respect and honor, and our hearts' allegiance.

It also involves Jesus as a name to be taken seriously. As our Scripture from Philippians indicates in Chapter 2, verses 10-11:

10 so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus' name is sacred as well, but we have been given it and assured that we can use it to pray, praise, celebrate, mourn, or grieve.

This includes the title “Lord” for Jesus. Jesus is our Lord and Savior, or as Thomas the disciple confessed, meeting the risen Lord, “My lord and My God.” This is a reminder that our speech matters; we are often poor witnesses for Jesus when we speak as if his name, God’s, or the name of Jesus doesn’t matter.

It does matter because it involves our hearts. As Jesus told us, what we say comes from the heart, Matthew 12:34, our words reveal us.

What we say matters. But what we do matters as well because we not only speak of the LORD with our words but with our lives. All the religious language in the world will not compensate for a life lived without authenticity and integrity. We are to focus on living in harmony with the teachings of the Ten Commandments, as well as the words of Jesus. The Israelites were meant to represent God to the world in word and deed, and so are we. Sure, we may fail at times, but that is not an excuse to abandon the principles of our faith. We represent by what we do and say.

One of the vital areas of the name LORD is the assurance of the LORD’s name. The LORD’s name, as given to the Hebrew people, is I AM or I WILL BE, as in I will be with you in the here and now. This is what the LORD tells Moses when he is commissioned to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the enslaved Hebrew people. The name is a promise of God's presence. This is like Jesus being called Emmanuel—God with us. The LORD is with us now and in the past and will continue into the future.

Later in the book of Exodus, the Lord gives some content to the name, saying I AM a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. That is who the Lord is and what God’s nature is. When we see LORD in Scripture, we can see that what follows tells us about God or Jesus.

The giving of the name LORD is a promise that God will be present to us in all aspects of life, but especially worship, where the worship service points in many ways to the presence of the LORD. That name, LORD, abides with us in worship, as well when we call on the name of the Lord in prayer. Worship also summons us to revere God’s name. Every week without fail, and many of us daily, pray. We pray the Lord’s prayer, and the prayer line “Hallowed be Thy name,” or better still, “Thy name be kept holy.” This reminds us of the sacredness of God’s name and our calling to speak and live in harmony with that holiness.

Also:

We often pray in the name of Jesus, implying that by using that name, we have a relationship with God we can depend on. We come to worship the LORD, who has revealed to us a name we can use to call on God and rely on his presence. It’s like the 23rd Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” This is not an impersonal lord; it is our God, the LORD, the one who gives us God’s name, who is with us always. When we worship and when we go out into the world.

We bless each other and the Lord with our worship, prayers, and spiritual lives. Many of us have a prayer list we offer to God each day. People we know, situations we care about, and even those who oppose us and differ from us. We give them to the LORD's care.

And each Sunday, you receive a blessing in the name of the Lord at the end of worship, and in some form, it reminds us to go out into the world as the Lord's blessed and holy people, taking God's love with us to testify to our faith in word and deed. As someone once said, we may be the only sermon people hear and the only Bible they ever read.

Finally, one of the most vital aspects of not misusing the Lord's name is not attributing to the Lord what the Lord is not saying. This was a common problem as false prophets would speak with authority in the name of God, things like "We have Peace" and Jeremiah took them on and said in Jeremiah 8:11:

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

¹¹They have treated the wound of the daughter of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.

And as Ezekiel the Prophet says in Ezekiel 13:10:

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

¹⁰ ..., because they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace,

It is condemned by the tablets of the law and the preaching of the prophets to ascribe to the LORD things that are not true.

So, using the name of the LORD is not a trifling matter; it is serious business, reminding us of who we are, what we believe, and how we are to live. And it is a name given depth by the Lord Jesus Christ, who paints for us a picture of God to guide us.

We can take the LORD's name in vain or misuse it when we attribute to God things that are not in harmony with God's love for Creation.

We know this on a personal level when someone tries to explain a tragic death or injury as God's will. Most of us cringe. This is far worse than swearing; it paints a false picture of the Lord and almost always fails to comfort. For most, it paints a picture of God that is inaccurate, blaming the issues of being human and exercising free will on God when, in fact, these are part of the blessings that God has given us.

But it is also true on a social level.

If you hear claims of acts of hate, division, nastiness, and cynicism attributed to the LORD, know they are not from God, and it is our duty to speak up. With the caveat that the Bible teaches, we are to speak the Truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), for any other way makes us no different from those who attribute false things to the Lord.

Remember the commandment, the third commandment:

7 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.

9 Therefore God exalted Jesus even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,

10 so that at the name given to Jesus
Every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.