

## You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God

The 3<sup>rd</sup> commandments God gave to His people was that they were not to misuse His name. God added **“for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”** God places great importance on His name and how it is used or misused. The reason God is so serious about His name is because in biblical times one’s name was far more than a means of identifying someone. It spoke of one’s character. To defame His name is to defame His character, the covenant He had made with Israel and His love for mankind.

In Old Testament times the Jewish people took the sacredness of God’s name perhaps a little further than necessary and certainly further than we need to take it on this side of the Cross but it emphasized how important His name was. To them His name, as given to Moses, was so sacred that they spoke it only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27). Jesus put the use of His name into a balanced perspective when He taught His disciples to pray to God who was their Father in heaven while acknowledging that His name was to be hallowed or sacred. He is both the God beyond anything we can imagine and worthy of our uttermost worship and at the same time He is the intimate God who created us so we can have fellowship with Him.

We live in a day when little serious thought is given to language. Listen to evening TV and you will generally hear language that a generation ago was offensive and not permitted to be used in any media. Media bleeps out a variety of words that they feel still should not be used in public but they never bleep out someone saying “O God” or that which is similar.

The best way to understand this commandment is to understand how the Israelites understood it when it was given and then see the way Jesus explained its meaning for His generation. In Old Testament times the primary reference to misusing God’s name was in taking an oath. The use of God’s name in making an oath implied two things. First it implied that God was a witness to what was being said. No one wanted to lie in front of God. The approach of using God’s name as a part of an oath included the concept of Him being present and one would not want to misuse it in that setting. Secondly when one used God’s name in an oath he was implying that somehow God was a co-signer on it and was therefore the guarantor of it. Making any oath using God’s name was saying that God stood behind what they were saying. To use His name and intentionally tell a lie or to make a promise and not intend to follow through on it was to misuse His name.

The Old Testament has a great deal to say about the importance of oaths taken in God’s name. Read Leviticus 19:12 and Malachi 3:5. To perjure oneself by not telling the truth or not keeping an oath made using God’s name was equal to being a sorcerer, an adulterer, oppressing widows and the fatherless, or depriving foreigners of justice.

Fast forward a 1000 plus years to the time of the New Testament. The rabbis knew the seriousness of taking an oath or promising something in God’s name and then not following through on it. They found themselves in situations where a lie seemed preferable to the truth so

they all but made a game of how to tell a lie and not be accountable to God for doing it. They had an incredible list of oath statements that appeared legitimate but in reality were not oaths that fell into the category of misusing God's name and therefore making Him a part of the lie. They would swear by heaven or earth, by Jerusalem or perhaps by their own heads that what they were saying was true or the promise they were making would be kept. So long as God was not directly called upon to be a witness or guarantor of it they were safe from sin even while they knew they were lying. It became in Jesus' day a case of "I can tell a lie if I keep my fingers crossed behind me so I am not really guilty of lying?"

Read Matthew 5:33-37. Jesus began by saying the time had come to stop making oaths, especially oaths that the speaker knew were false. There are groups like Quakers who refuse to take an oath even in a court setting. Most Christian groups do not believe, for good reason, that this was what Jesus meant. Jesus was saying that it really did not matter if you swore under heaven and not under God since heaven is God's you are really swearing by Him. Jesus said the same for the earth which belongs to God so if you swear by that you are swearing by Him. He pulled together the practice of the rabbis and others who knew the law and said you cannot escape responsibility by using some other witness besides God because God is owner of them all. Whatever you take an oath by or make a promise under you are ultimately taking invoking God's name because He is lord of everything. God is truth and any falsehood associated with Him is an affront to His character. Read Numbers 23:19.

Were Jesus going to speak to us today He would say "You cannot escape telling the truth because your fingers are crossed because I own your fingers and I also own your mother's grave so don't go there either." Jesus added, "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'." which is sometimes translated "Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no'." Jesus was saying we don't have to specifically invoke God's name when making a promise or reporting an incident since God is a part of everything. We should always tell the truth and always intend to keep promises we make.

In addition to telling the truth we be trusted to do our best to keep the promises we make. Want to know what the number one broken promise Christians make? It is the promise "I'll pray for you."

Official oath taking may not be common but it is still used. We still use it in court where one swears under God to tell the truth. People say "I swear under God I did not do it."

There are two occasions when people today in essence swear by God. One is when they go to church and recite the marriage vows before God and those present at the wedding. Before any marriage ends those involved should rethink the fact that they promised in God's house and under Him to do their best to ensure the marriage lasts until death do us part.

A second area too many Christians take an oath and fail to follow through is when parents bring a child to church for baptism or dedication and make promises to God regarding how they will raise the child. I'm afraid too often those making such commitments are taking God's name in vain by promising to do what they know they are not going to give everything to fulfilling.

Taking any oath that is not true or making any promise one is not totally committed to keeping is misusing God's name.

A second way of misusing God's name is to use it in a trivial way, which is in any way that detracts from the character of the God it represents. The word translated vain carries the idea of empty as does the Latin word from which we get vain or vanity. Too often our society uses the phrase "My God" or "OMG" without thinking of how that may reflect on the character of God. Any phrase that directly or indirectly detracts from the majesty and holiness of God should not be used by Christians, including the commonly used phrases like "The man upstairs" and the "Big guy in the sky."

The first 4 commandments are designed to tell us how to relate to God. God reminds us that when we use His name in any way we must do so in a way that does not diminish His character or His activity. Our "yes" is to be a "yes" and our "no" a "no." Every promise we make is really an oath in which God is both a witness and a guarantor so we must keep our promises. Because God is so marvelous we must never trivialize Him by ascribing to Him a name or designation that is trivial.