

***Question: What does it mean to use God's name in vain? How can we avoid this sin?***

The third of the Ten Commandments states: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:7 NAS). Others have translated this command as, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God” (NIV). In this commandment in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “vain” includes treating God’s name as worthless by using it in unnecessarily idle, empty or meaningless ways as well as using it for the purposes of deceit and fraud.

Instead, Jesus taught his disciples that God’s name is to be “Hallowed,” a word that means to be highly honored as holy (Matthew 6:9). Earlier in the book of Psalms the writer had cried out, “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” (Psalm 29:2; cf. Philippians 2:9-11). In fact, ancient Jewish scribes cleaned their pens and used fresh ink when writing God’s name because of its holiness. Even today, students of Biblical Hebrew are taught to use the word LORD as a substitute for Yahweh—the personal, unspeakable and holy name of God (Exodus 3:15; 33:19). In a similar way, we need to reverence God and avoid words or behaviors that disrespect the holiness of God.

For example, a person who uses God’s name to swear to something falsely or to pledge his word when he does not intend to keep it misuses God’s name. God warned Israel, “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:12). Some may misuse God’s name (or some form of it) to show surprise or anger. Others may insert his name into their conversation while they pause searching for an appropriate word to use. Such use of God’s name not only empties it of meaning but also insults his character and his works as revealed in the Bible. The attempt to bring harm to others by the expression “God damn you,” dishonors the God who does not want anyone to perish but that all be saved (2 Peter 3:9). Also, we need to recognize that words like “gosh” and “golly” are euphemisms (an altered form used as a substitute) for God. Still, many carelessly speak these and other forms of the names of God and of Jesus with little awareness that they are profaning the holiness of the Father or his Son.

On one occasion, Jesus spoke of misusing God's name in the practice of religious sham. He said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:22-23). Yet, we continue to have false preachers who claim special powers and use God's name to deceive people into sending them money for favors from the Lord.

Often, people who lack genuine faith in Jesus do not understand why Christians are concerned about the holiness of God. Therefore, the words and behaviors I have described may seem trivial to them. Unfortunately, even some who claim to worship God have been influenced by the society around them more than by a consciousness of God's holiness. They, too, have fallen into careless misuse of God's name. But the wise man said, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). By the discipline of spiritual wisdom and by meditation on the holiness and fear of God, we can be kept from misuse of God's name. It will also help to remember that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men" (2 Corinthians 5:10-11)

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