

Do I take the Name of God in Vain? – Exodus 20:7

INTRODUCTION -- COMMANDMENT # 3 – *"Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."* (Exodus 20:7; cf. Deu 5:11)

Meaning of "vain" -- What does it mean to take the name of God in vain? This is the key to understanding the Third Commandment. The word for "vain" means "uselessly or deceptively or emptily or falsely." The person turns the name of God into something that is meaningless or empty like the names of idols. For example, the person who makes a vow in the name of the LORD must keep it at all costs except when the vow is evil or something prevented the person from keeping the vow then it can be redeemed (cf. Lev. 27:1-13). He is not allowed to break it. What happens if the vow was made under the guise of falsehood and he was deceived into making the vow - should the believer still have to keep it? The answer is found in Joshua 9 (and see 2 Samuel 21). The name of the LORD is very important to God. He has given God's people the honour to use the name of God. Therefore, God expects His people to use His Name respectfully and correctly. God's name has power. It is not like any name on earth. Was it not in the Name of the Lord that the prophetic ministry stood on? Was it not in the name of the Lord that the apostles of Christ performed their miracles?! The Name of God is an all-powerful name. How could people make it into something meaningless and empty?

I. When Unbelievers Break It --

The 3rd Commandment is applied indirectly to unbelievers who swear using the name of Christ. The unbelievers would include our bosses in the office, our neighbour next door and the actors in movies. The name of Christ has become synonymous with "useless" because it is used as a slang to describe someone who is talking rubbish. It has been used as a swear word and as an exclamation mark! It is understood to be applied indirectly to unbelievers because the Ten Commandments are meant for the people of God only. It is an indirect application in that during a gospel meeting or sharing the gospel with a sinner, the believer is permitted to say that swearing in the Name of God is breaking the 3rd Commandment.

Furthermore, the 3rd Commandment is quite a neglected commandment. Most of us think that we have always been able to obey this commandment because it is quite an easy commandment to obey compared with the other nine since we do not swear as Christians.

II. When Believers Break It –

On closer examination of the 3rd Commandment, one will find that it is one of the most comprehensive commandments that impact our daily lives. As long as we call ourselves Christians i.e. we TAKE the Name of Christ and attached His name to ours, this commandment binds us to a Christian way of life wherein we are bound to reflect Christ in all that we say, do and think. We must now think like Christ and that would be according to Scriptures. **Philippians 4:8**, *"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."*

What we do is covered in the next verse of Philipians. **Philipians 4:9**, *"Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you."* The words that we utter must also reflect Christ.

You may ask: how does what I say, do and think be covered by this 3rd Commandment?

As long as we tell others that we are Christians, we have used the Name of Christ and we continue to use the Name of Christ. We are a walking testimony of Christ in all that we say and do and everywhere we do them! There is no place or time that this lets up. This is a lifetime and perpetual testimony of Christ that we have to bear. When we fail Him such as when we fall into sin by saying a word out of turn or think evil thoughts, we commit a sin or stumble someone, we have taken His name in vain and God will not hold us guiltless. If our lives do not reflect the Jesus Christ of the Bible, we have taken His Name in vain! For example if we are lazy, we reflect a lazy Christ. Is Christ lazy? If we lie then we reflect a Christ who lies! Does Christ tell lies? We have a God who cannot lie! Whenever we sin and do not repent, we remain in sin. We reflect a Christ who is a sinner like us!

The 3rd Commandment includes the application against the abuse of Christ's Name by the unbelievers but more so it applies to Christians who sin against Christ.

III. Hiding My Faith? --

Some might think that the best way to keep from breaking this commandment is to not tell people that we are Christians. We may reason, "Let me be a secret Christian just to play it safe". But we put ourselves into another danger before God when we do that. The Bible says in **Mark 8:38**, *"Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

The Christian has no choice unless he chooses to sin, if he is truly born again, but to testify publicly that he is a Christian. He gives thanks for his meals publicly. He must speak words that reflect Christ according to the Scriptures. His heart motivation must also be Christian whereby God's glory is more important to him than anything else.

IV. Applying the Commandment –

In the days of the Lord Jesus Christ, this 3rd Commandment was badly abused and distorted. It was taught according to tradition, which was a distortion of God's Word that "you are not to swear falsely but keep all your oaths." On the surface there seems to be nothing wrong with the tradition. Is it not good to not swear falsely as well as to keep our oaths? Yes it is good, but the distortion was found in the limitation of oath-making that one was bound to keep. If it is not an oath, then one was encouraged to break it. **Matthew 5:33-37**, *"Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither*

shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."

If I were to make an oath in the name of heaven, earth, Jerusalem or even my own head, it was not the same as making an oath in the name of God. If it was made in the Name of God, then one would have to keep it at all costs. But when it came to making oaths in others' names, which was a very convenient substitute for the name of God, the common belief and practice of the people of God was to break it as and when they liked. They believed they were not duty bound to keep it since it was not made in the name of God. According to tradition the 3rd Commandment was limited to oaths made in the name of the LORD.

Therefore, Christ had to set the record straight. He began by saying "Swear not at all." What does Jesus mean? Is Jesus teaching us not to swear at all under all circumstances? What about testifying in the law courts where the witness is required to swear on the Bible? A young man joining the national service will also have to take an oath, and so do the groom and bride on the day of holy matrimony. The Apostle Paul made an oath in **1 Thessalonians 5:27**, *"I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren."* The Lord Jesus Christ is not teaching that the believer cannot make any oaths at all under all circumstances. He was against the false oaths made in those days as taught by the traditions of the Jews.

The Jews had different levels of keeping their word. Their word meant little in day to day conversation. When they made oaths they used the names of heaven, earth and Jerusalem and even their own heads as substitutes, and even then they did not intend to keep their word. Their interpretation of the 3rd Commandment was limited to "oaths made in the name of God" which resulted in these abuses. The Jews made themselves liars without realizing it.

Jesus explained that heaven was God's throne, the earth was His footstool, Jerusalem was God's city and that the head was beyond their control implying that it is within God's sovereign control. All the above replacements in the making of oaths were domains of God and therefore were owned by God. It was just like using the Name of God when they swore by these "alternatives."

Why then do we have to swear at all when we have no intention of keeping it? It is better that our daily conversation be yea, yea and nay, nay. Let our yes be yes and our no be no! The Christian should mean what he says and say what he means. There must be no hidden agenda behind what the Christian says. He must be transparent in all he says and does as a way of life. When he can do this, then when it comes to making oaths he will be more than happy to keep them. If he is faithful in little, he will also be faithful in much.

The warning from Christ is that anything more than this is evil - the motive is evil; the action is evil. The intention is to deceive. If our conviction is yes, say yes.

Jesus was not teaching new truths here. He was fixing errors as believed and taught according to traditions. The teachings from the OT are in: **Leviticus 19:12**, *"And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD."* **Deuteronomy 23:23**, *"That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the LORD thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth."*

APPLICATION

The 3rd Commandment is not an easy commandment to obey even though as children of God we are able to obey all the Ten Commandments including Commandment number three. But it is not an impossible commandment to keep as long as we keep our word and say what we mean and mean what we say, think godly thoughts and behave in holiness. It is difficult when one has an evil heart with a hidden agenda whenever he speaks with someone. We must be wary of such persons. There are many of them around. Some of them are in the church and have passed themselves off as pastors and elders. But they are nothing more than wolves in sheep's clothing who infiltrate churches to deceive the gullible, the trusting and naïve. [See 2 Peter 2:10-22.]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have there been times when you failed to defend the Name of Christ when it was used as a swear word? Please share.
2. Can a new believer, who has just accepted Christ as his Lord and Saviour and who is afraid to tell his parents for fear of being punished, be charged with being ashamed of Christ?
3. Can a local church that bears a wrong testimony of Christ by using CCM music during worship services and preaches the health and wealth gospel be charged with breaking the 3rd Commandment?
4. How do you help someone who calls himself a Christian but keeps telling lies and refuses to repent of his sin because he sincerely thinks that he is not telling lies because white lies have been acceptable to him all his life?
5. Can you cite a biblical example when this sin was committed and the judgement of God was executed?