

WHAT EXACTLY IS IT TO TAKE GOD'S NAME IN VAIN?

You shall not carry God's Name in vain, for the LORD God will not forgive one who carries His Name in vain (Exodus 20: 7).

Most of us who are familiar with the so-called Ten Commandments — or as some prefer to call them, the Ten Words — will immediately spot a couple of translation differences from the way this third commandment in the Decalogue is traditionally recited.

It's usually rendered, **You shall not take God's Name in vain, for the LORD God will not hold guiltless the one who takes His Name in vain.** Spoken this way, it has tended to give us the idea that to take God's Name in vain means to use the word "God" flippantly, or even blasphemously, as a kind of curse or swear word. That is certainly true, for anyone who knows the LORD God shudders at the thought of using Yahweh's Name thoughtlessly. (¹)

To this day Jewish folk will not even speak or write God's Personal Name, Yahweh, which our English translations render in all capitals as LORD. Jews write "G-d" or use a circumlocution, "Ha Shem", meaning "the Name", and then usually add, "Blessed be He" out of reverence and for fear of taking that holy Name in vain.

I remember being taught as a young child that it's sinful to say, "Good heavens" or "Heavens above", for that really is another way of saying, "Good God" in a thoughtless way. I am persuaded this is proper teaching!

Still you may ask, "But what difference does the literal translation make when we translate both the Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint text to say we must **not carry God's Name in vain?** (²) By answering this question I hope to show this is a *significant* nuance. We'll see how this insight helps us to unlock a deeper impact of the LORD'S commandment.

But a warning first! In writing this I have become painfully aware that I, myself, have **carried** the Name of Yahweh God in vain, so have brought myself under the dreadful curse of standing condemned, or as the text says, guilty before YHWH.

Oh, how I have realised more than ever the high and holy standards Yahweh God requires of His people! I suspect that after reading on, you too will fall upon your knees and cry to your heavenly Father for His undeserved, but freely given, forgiveness of sins through the Gospel-announcement that the atoning blood of Jesus in the New Covenant has lifted the curse from the guilty who repent!

¹ My informed readers will know that the God of the OT's Personal Name is YHWH ... Yahweh / Yehovah. "God" strictly speaking is not a name, but a title.

² Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in [JEWISH WISDOM: Ethical, Spiritual, and Historical Lessons from the Great Works and Thinkers](#), (William Morrow & Co. Inc. NY, 1994) p316 claims he has literally translated from the Hebrew text. I can concur that the Greek LXX also allows for his translation because the word λαμβάνω / *lambanō* can be rendered to bear, to carry, as well as to take or receive. In addition, the LXX instead of **will not hold him guiltless** or **will not forgive him** is perhaps best translated as **will not cleanse him** (καθαρίζω / *katharizō*), though practically it means exactly the same thing.

WHY IS TAKING OR CARRYING GOD'S NAME IN VAIN SUCH A HEINOUS SIN?

To my mind it's rather sobering to firstly observe that *this commandment comes before sins like murder, adultery, theft, and abuse of parents*. To our modern minds this proscription of the third Commandment might seem like an over-statement. On the one hand we have a thoughtless use of the Name of God, but on the other hand we have vile and heinous 'sins of the flesh' ... taking a human life by murder, cheating on your wife or husband, robbing someone of what's rightfully theirs, abusing and wounding one's father and mother, slandering one's neighbour, etc.

Rabbi Telushkin explains the reason succinctly; *The literal translation suggests that what is forbidden is to use "God" to justify selfish and/or evil causes*. He then goes on to cite two egregious historical examples. (³)

"KILL THEM ALL, GOD WILL RECOGNISE HIS OWN!"

These are the infamous and dastardly words of the commander of the medieval Papal Crusader army, Arnaut Almaric, uttered in 1209 A.D. His army occupied the French city of Beziers, which contained, according to a bishop's report, 220 Christian 'heretics' known as Cathars.

Unable to ferret them out, the Crusaders asked Almaric, "What shall we do? We can't tell the good from the wicked." Pope Innocent III's representative replied, *"Kill them all, God knows His own!"*

Fifteen thousand people were murdered in that single day's slaughter. The Roman Church conveniently assured the Crusaders in advance their sins would all be forgiven. (⁴) This is a stark example of using God's Name to justify evil, but the principle is established.

In the same way many in the Church in the 1800's justified cruel slavery by quoting selective texts from the Bible — out of context. And whilst it is true that the Old Testament has much to say about servant-slaves, a careful reading of the contexts and of the entire Biblical message, actually reveals the gaping chasm between the way the Hebrews treated their servant-slaves and how it was done in the American setting.

To murder a slave in Israel was a capital offence (Ex 21:20). And if the master punished a servant so severely that s/he lost a limb, or even a tooth, he was required to set his slave free (Ex 21: 26-27). It was also forbidden to return a runaway slave to his or her master (Deut 23:16) and as Telushkin remarks, *a Biblical ordinance that the Supreme Court ignored in the infamous Dred Scott decision of 1857. For according to biblical law, the kidnapping of people and their subsequent enslavement (which is how slaves were originally procured in the United States) is a capital crime: He who kidnaps a person, whether he sold him or is still holding him, shall be put to death (Ex 21:16).*

³ Ibid, p 316

⁴ See Otto Friedrich, *The End of the World*, pages 75-78.

All of which is to say that around 2,500 years ago, a servant-slave under Jewish law had far greater rights than slaves in the USA not even two hundred years ago could only dream of. The point of this is to say that these examples are egregious violations of the Third Commandment by those justifying their evil behaviours — all the while appealing to the Bible to do it.

NO FORGIVENESS!?

We note that the Third Commandment not to carry God's Name in vain is the only commandment where Yahweh God warns that He will not forgive one who carries His Name in vain. It might also be translated as will not cleanse the one who perpetrates ungodly behaviour while claiming to be of "God".

It sounds like an unpardonable sin, does it not? Well, not exactly. What it is saying is that the believer who is currently living a life of hypocrisy stands outside of God's forgiveness. This believer is in a perilous state. As long as such a state of dishonouring God persists, there is no cleansing, no possibility of fellowship with the Father God. But of course, God is forever holding out his hands imploring for us to get it right.

When someone behaves in a foolish or even wicked way, he or she discredits himself or herself — and potentially injures another party. But when someone claiming to be a 'Christian', commits the same evil, he or she discredits the holy Name of God and does great harm to the cause of God. Such hypocrisy turns people away from the God they allegedly represent.

It becomes even more abhorrent when an authority-figure in the church offends and sins against innocent children! Need I say any more? People purporting to be lovers of God actually carry His Name in vain by their inconsistent words and deeds, thus alienating outsiders from the life and love of God.

Who can estimate the lasting damage done to the cause of Christ by ministers and priests who have preyed upon the innocent and damaged them for life? This is why it is clearly a heinous offence to carry the LORD's Name in vain. No wonder the LORD God pronounces the sin so heinous.

This surely was the sin of the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, the teachers of the Law, whom Jesus lambasted so severely. They devoured widows' houses because of their love for money. Jesus condemned their long public praying as a pretense which dishonoured God (Matt 23:14). Their ostentatious donations into the Temple treasury were a form of carrying God's Name in vain. They were not being image-bearers of the One True God whose heart is for truth in the inward parts.

They were using their religious status to promote their own reputations in the eyes of others. They turned the tax collectors, the sexually immoral, and the sinners and down-and-outers, away from the God they pretended they were serving, when all they were exalting was their own egos and reputations before men.

How different to the example of **CHARLIE KIRK ...**

THEY EXPECTED RIOTS, BUT GOT RENEWAL

Just eleven days after Kirk's assassination, his wife, Erika quoted Jesus who asked God to forgive those who crucified him "for they know not what they do." "That man, I forgive him," she said, summoning every sinew in her body, crying. She said it's because of what Christ did and what Charlie would have done. She said the answer to hate is not more hate, but to "love our enemies."

When evil struck down Kirk, they expected burning buildings. Riots. Violence.

Instead? Churches overflowed. Atheists bought Bibles. Young people who hadn't prayed in years fell to their knees. Inside and outside the arena 270,000 gathered for his memorial. Erika Kirk told the world:

"I forgive him because it was what Christ did, and it's what Charlie would do."

The death of Charlie Kirk will reverberate for a long time. He was a man who lived his faith and a bullet from a radicalised lunatic will not silence him: Charlie's death has spurred a new sense of resolve to uphold truth here in Australia also. Young people shaking off apathy, are asking, 'what can we do?'

Oh, the immeasurable good brought into the world when a Christian loves God with all his heart, and who by his acts of kindness and words of grace helps to lead many to seek our Lord Jesus and his heavenly Father because he carries God's Name not in vain!

LORD, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy mountain?

He who walks uprightly and does what is right, and speaks truth from the heart; who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his neighbour, nor speaks evil of his friends;

In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who stands by his oath even to his own hurt; who does not lend his money at interest, and who does not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved (Ps 15).

Here is a believer who speaks truth from his heart, who does not seek to take advantage of others, whose word is his bond (even if by keeping it he suffers loss himself!) and who has a "good reputation" amongst outsiders because of his or her godly character. He appeals to 'outsiders' to "taste and see that the LORD is good"! They become thirsty to know our God and Father.

But oh, what damage the Christian does, who attends church worship, who cusses and swears and speaks filth in his work place, who is dishonest in business, who speaks harsh, unkind, and critical words, to people (including in his own home!). This is the one who carries the Name of the LORD in vain!

THE EMPRESS'S LOST BRACELET

Rabbi Samuel went to Rome. The Empress lost a bracelet and he happened to find it. A proclamation was issued throughout the land that if anyone returned it within 30 days, he would receive a handsome reward, but, if after 30 days he did not do so, he would lose his head. Rabbi Samuel did not return the bracelet within the 30 days, but did so thereafter.

The Empress said to the rabbi, “Were you not in the province?”

“Yes, I was here”, he replied.

“But did you not hear the proclamation?”

“I heard it”, he said. “What did it say?” she asked.

He replied, “If anyone returns it within 30 days, he will receive such-and-such a reward, but if he returns it after 30 days, he will lose his head.”

She interrogated, “In that case, why did you not return it within the thirty days?” He said, “Because I did not want anyone to say that I returned it out of fear of you, whereas in fact, I returned it out of fear of the All-merciful [God].”

The Empress said, “Blessed be the God of the Jews.” (⁵)

Now there was a man who truly feared to take the Name of Yahweh God in vain! The person who claims to love God and who walks like this is the one who honours the Name of Yahweh. It grieves him to think he may bring dishonour to that Name.

I don't know about you, but I fear I have a long way to go. Considering this Third Commandment anew has truly humbled me. My heart has been pierced through with a deep sense of conviction before the Most High God.

My great consolation is that the Gospel announces that our blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, who perfectly carried the honour of His God before all mankind, has borne in his own body the curse of my sin, so that I am now free by the power of his indwelling Spirit of life, to honour the Name of his God and my God, of his Father and my Father. Same for you!

May God forgive us for the times when our lives have been a contradiction to His own revealed character and that of His beloved Son, Jesus. May God be merciful to us for the times we have carried His holy Name in vain before our family, our friends, and our neighbors. May God grant us to walk worthy of His wonderful Name, and so shall we enjoy the joyful fellowship and glory of our Almighty heavenly Father forever — not to mention the many who hopefully will be drawn to know our God too!

Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name ... Amen.

⁵ Ibid as told by Rabbi Telushkin, p318.