

The Ten Commandments 3:

**Do not lift up the name
of your God for vain
purpose.**

The Ten Commandments

The Third Commandment

Topics:

What does it mean to take the name of the Lord
God in vain?

How far can we take it?

How can we lift up the name of the Lord God
correctly?

The relationship at the heart of the
commandment

Implications for Prayer

The Lord will not hold guiltless those who take
his name in vain

The Third Commandment

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (RSV)

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. (NRSV)

You shall not lift up the name of Adonai your God for vain purpose, for Adonai will not clear one who uses the Name in vain (Broken Tablets)

What does using God's name "in vain," "for vain purpose" mean?

vain: dictionary definition:

1. having no real value, idle, worthless
2. marked by futility or ineffectualness; useless

do not use God's name:

- in an idle, superfluous way, or
- for a worthless or unworthy purpose, or
- for an unnecessary or futile purpose

What does using God's name "in vain," "for vain purpose" mean?

"positive" statement of the commandment:

we should lift up the name of God only:

- in earnestness, in a full and deep awareness of what we are doing
- for worthy, valuable purposes
- for necessary, fruitful purposes

What does using God's name "in vain," "for vain purpose" mean?

examples of lifting up God's name in vain:

1. profanity. Dragging God's name through the mud of human emotion.
2. false swearing. Swearing to contradict known facts, to deceive
3. false prophecy
4. "reflex religion" Reflexive use of God's name without a religious commitment (often in a time of need)

What does using God's name "in vain," "for vain purpose" mean?

examples of lifting up God's name in vain:

5. frivolous use of God's name.

Exclamations such as "Oh My God,"
"My Lord!"

6. unworthy use of God's name. (e.g. for magic or for destructive purposes)

7. unnecessary or unfruitful use of God's name.

- praying for the sex of an unborn child
- saying a blessing before a meal and then not enjoying the meal
- swearing before the oblivious

How Far Can We Take It?

Can we of dust and ashes ever use the transcendent name of God without subtly taking it in vain?

- our finite minds cannot know the fullness of God
- our praise, glorification, exaltation, honoring of God will always fall short of what God is worthy of

we should consider the commandment a:

- gracious permission to use God's name
- a kindness bestowed on us by the One who knows our need to connect God to our lives
- this permission however has boundaries

How Far Can We Take It?

Is every action of a religious person a reflection on God's name?

If we call ourselves “Christians” and do not act as Christ, are we then taking God's name in vain?

How Can We Lift Up the Name of the Lord God Correctly?

we should lift up the name of God only

- in earnestness, in a full and deep awareness of what we are doing
- for worthy, valuable purposes
- for necessary, fruitful purposes

basis: the relationship at the heart of the commandment

The Relationship at the Heart of the Commandment

our relationship with God involves:

- covenant loyalty
- respect and love (as in any human relationship)

therefore we should try to lift up God's name:

- respectfully (holy, awe-filled reverence)
- lovingly

Implications for Prayer

In praying, we are invoking God's name,
“lifting up” the name of God.

Third Commandment requires
we pray for:

- worthy, valuable purposes
- necessary, fruitful purposes

pray with a deep earnestness and honesty:

- no “social duplicity” when we call upon
God's name
- words matter, and they matter a lot to God
- must not make God's name a mere breath,
an emptiness

Implications for Prayer

Moses: God “**great, mighty and awesome**”

Jeremiah: God “**great and mighty**” (*not awesome*)

Daniel: God “**great and awesome**” (*not mighty*)

rabbis: Jeremiah and Daniel were being true to their experience of God. They would not lie to the Holy One

When the temple destroyed by the Romans:
“**Who is like You among the gods (*elim*)**”

A rabbi suggested praying “**Who is like You among the mute**” (*ilemim*)

Implications for Prayer

Job: **“God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb” (Job 3:3)**

blasphemous? or deeply honest?

To be true to the Third Commandment requires we lift up the name of God only with deep earnestness and honesty. We must not lie to the Holy One. We must not lift up the name of God with adjectives whose meaning is empty to us.

The Lord Will Not Hold Guiltless Those Who Take His Name in Vain

**“ . . . for the Lord will not hold him
guiltless who takes his name in vain”
(RSV)**

taking God's name in vain may seem like a
victimless act. What can we possibly do to
harm God?

The Lord Will Not Hold Guiltless Those Who Take His Name in Vain

consider the relationship at the heart of the
commandment

- may hurt God
- may hurt our relationship with God
- may sully God's reputation and esteem
among other people (at the deepest level,
the use of God's name is a matter of
mission)

References

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