

God's Answer to Your Greatest Struggles
Our Struggle with Religion
Exodus 20:7

Maybe you ask: What does taking God's name in vain have to do with our struggle with religion? Well, let's read the third commandment directly from the Bible and try to understand how it relates to you and me today.

Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name. Exodus 20:7 NLT

We initially think that this command prohibits using God's name as a swear word. And certainly that understanding and application of the commandment is correct. I looked up the name "Jesus" in the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* the other day. Here's what I discovered:

- noun, the central figure of the Christian religion, considered by Christians to be the Christ or Messiah and the Son of God.
- informal exclamation, expressing irritation, dismay, or surprise.

Ever thought about the number of times in a given day you hear the name of God used in this way: to express irritation, dismay or surprise? But is this third command just about swearing? Is it limited in its application to the words of our mouth? Or is it more comprehensive than this?

To answer those questions we need to remind ourselves of the importance of the "name" of someone in biblical times. What's in a name? Well, today, not too much. For example, we often choose names for our children more because of how the name sounds or whether or not it was found in our family line rather than the meaning of the word itself. In biblical times, however, someone's name often spoke of their person, their character. And this is particularly true of the name of God.ⁱ

Notice again what verse 7 says: "Do not misuse the name of the LORD, your God." As in the first and second commandment, the LORD is Yahweh, the great "I am who I am." He is the self-existent one, the one who *is*. And who he *is* is not necessarily whom we want him to be.ⁱⁱ In fact, the name of Yahweh was considered so holy that it was pronounced only once a year by the high priest when giving the blessing on what was known in Israel as the great day of atonement.ⁱⁱⁱ

With that in mind, to "misuse the name of the Lord" is to make any statement – in word or action – that misrepresents the true character of God. Just how do we do this?

FALSE CLAIMS

One way we humans misuse the name of God is by *false claims*. Maybe you're beginning to see now how all of this touches on our struggle with religion. There are about 22 major religions in the world today and thousands of splinter groups, all claiming to one degree or another to represent *the way* or *a way* to God. Who's right? Who am I to believe? So many claim the name of God and claim to have the truth?

Throughout history people have appealed to God, attaching his name to their particular cause or endeavor. In fact, that's how many of the present-day religions in the world had their beginning. An individual, a prophet, or a type of spiritual guru claims to speak in the name of God (or in some cases, the *gods*). More extreme examples of this are the 9/11 terrorists who flew massive planes into skyscrapers killing hundreds and *all in the name of God*. Or go back in history starting about 900 years ago with the first Crusades. The motives were numerous: religious, social, and political, love of military adventure, simply to escape boredom, or the hope of plunder. Thousands of Europeans slaughtered thousands of Muslims – and all under a banner bearing the image of the cross.

Today on the political front it's popular to claim the name of God. After all, it wins votes. It sort of reminds me of some of the Super Bowl ads last Sunday. If you want to sell something, find a big name or well-known personality and get them to sell it for you. It works! And who can think of a bigger name than God? So if I name his name, maybe I'll get a following! But be careful. These can be false claims and they misuse the name of the Lord.

The *Today's English Version* speaks directly to what we're talking about. It translates the third commandment this way:

Do not use my name *for evil purposes*, for I, the LORD your God, will punish anyone who misuses my name. TEV

Many today want to open a franchise under God's name. In a franchise, you have the right to do business using the name of the company, but only on the condition that you appropriately represent the company name. While on my recent trip to France, I noticed the number of McDonalds that had sprung up all over Paris. What were previously traditional French cafés now bore the big red and yellow sign. But if you were to go into one of those McDonalds do you think you would seat you at a table with a white table cloth, a menu of cordon bleu and a bottle of Bordeaux? Certainly not! If they do, a company representative will pay them a visit and say something like this: "Look, if you carry our name, you serve our menu. If not, you're out of the franchise."

You can't use the name of McDonalds to promote your own thing. And you can't use God's name that way either.

Jesus once put it this way:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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 7:21-23

HYPOCRITICAL CLAIMS

The panorama of various religions is confused all the more by *hypocritical claims*. And this is another way that we can misuse the name of the Lord. Just as the multiplicity of religions in the world has brought great confusion to those who are sincere seekers, so also has the hypocrisy of those who claim to be believers.

What is hypocrisy? I think there is a lot of confusion on this question. The word (*hypokrisia*) originally meant “to play a part on stage.” One of my daughters, Mary Lynne, loves acting. When she’s part of a play, she *plays a role*. She pretends to be someone else.^{iv}

Christianity is as full of hypocrites as is anything else that is of any value. Light always tends to attract bugs; any good thing will attract those who superficially want to be part of it without having the real thing. There are false diamonds in jewelry because real diamonds exist. We have copies of Rembrandt’s paintings because the real ones exist. There are quacks in the medical profession because real doctors exist. The fact that Christianity attracts phonies is a good indication that it is authentic.

Whether we’re talking about pedophile priests, well-known protestant pastors or the every-day Christian in the workplace, our words and lives can “misuse” the name of the Lord.

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in *vain*; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” Matthew 15:7-9

The word *vain* means “empty.” It’s the same word used to translate the 3rd Commandment – not to take the name of the Lord *in vain*. Jesus is not condemning moral failure in the life of a sincere believer. We all fail and fall short of God’s idea. A biblical Christian is one who admits he is far from perfect but perfectly forgiven. A biblical Christian doesn’t pretend to be something he’s not. In contrast, a hypocrite is one who outwardly *pretends* to be good. To the degree that we outwardly *pretend to be a follower of the Lord*, but all the while are concealing sin in our lives, we are misusing the name of the Lord.

Let me ask you: Are you concealing sin in your life? You come to a church service, you name the name of Christ, but you are also hiding areas of your life that you know are inconsistent with God’s holy name. That is hypocrisy. That is misusing the name of the Lord.

IRREVERENT CLAIMS

We misuse the name of the Lord by *false claims* and by *hypocritical claims*. But here’s the one of which we’re probably the most guilty – *irreverent claims*. How many times this past week have you heard the name of God or of Jesus Christ used in a profane way?

I’ve been told that the number of swear words in vocabulary of the average American male is fifty-eight. That obviously reveals a lack of vocabulary among American males. And of the average American female? Twenty-nine. The late Colonel Sanders, founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken, once said that his conversion to Christ cost him half of his vocabulary. Even Christians

have been tricked into using bad expressions when they are upset. They are take-offs of the Lord's names such as: "Geeze" or "Jes" (short for Jesus), "Good Gosh," "Gosh Darn," "Lordy." This is known as "shoot cussin." Obviously there are other terms used, which we will not repeat, as they are vulgar profanities.

Branch Rickey, a member of Baseball's Hall of Fame and long-time manager of several major league teams, was a Christian. When he had been head of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he was at a meeting negotiating a ballplayer's contract in a deal involving big bucks. Suddenly, Rickey threw down his pencil, pushed back his chair, and growled, "The deal's off." The other men were confused. "What do you mean?" they asked. "We're coming along well with these negotiations." "Because," said Rickey, "you've been talking about a friend of mine, and I don't like it." "What do you mean? We haven't been talking about anyone, let alone a friend of yours." "Oh, yes, you have," replied Rickey. "You've mentioned him in almost every sentence." Finally they got the point as Rickey pointed out their profane use of the name of Jesus Christ. The men apologized, stopped their profanity and the negotiations continued.^v

BLASPHEMOUS CLAIMS

There is just a short step in the Bible between irreverent claims and blasphemous claims. Notice again the stern warning that God gives to us in this third commandment: "The LORD will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name" (Ex 20:7b NLT).

Let me place this passage alongside of a well-known and controversial passage in the New Testament. It's found in Mark 3:22-30.

²² The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons."²³ And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan?²⁴ "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.²⁵ "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.²⁶ "If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished!²⁷ "But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house.²⁸ "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter;²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"—³⁰ because they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit." Mark 3:22-30 NASU^{vi}

What is the sin of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?" It is resistance taken to the extreme. The context tells us that experts in the Jewish law had come down from Jerusalem to Galilee because they had heard about this extraordinary, miraculous work that Jesus was doing of exorcising demons. I believe that these religious leaders were under the conviction of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11), working through Jesus' life and ministry.

The question is, "How did they respond to the light they were receiving?" Mark tells us that they attributed the miracles Jesus was performing, not to the power of the Spirit,^{vii} but to the power of Satan. At that point, Jesus responds: "I tell you the truth, *all* the sins and blasphemies of men

will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Let me first make clear what the “unpardonable sin” of blasphemy against the Spirit *is not*. First, it is not a sin committed ignorantly, without your knowledge. Some Christians are obsessed over this question, wondering if *just maybe* they have somehow committed this sin. But here, these religious leaders were plotting to kill Jesus (3:6). Their rejection of the Messiah was very intentional.^{viii}

Second, the unpardonable sin is not simply a sin of the tongue, but a sin of the heart. It’s true that Mark adds in verse 30, “He said this *because* they were saying, ‘He has an evil spirit.’” But the words of these unbelieving religious leaders were simply a reflection of their heart – a heart of unbelief. Jesus says, “What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’”(Matthew 15:11). The sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit *is not* merely certain words that you might say. It is an attitude. The words are merely an expression of the attitude of the heart.^{ix}

Who can commit this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? The answer is: *only an unbeliever*. On the other hand, if the Holy Spirit is still convicting you and striving with you, then you have not come to the point in your life of “blaspheming the Holy Spirit.” And if you are concerned that you have committed this sin, then that very fact indicates that you haven’t committed this sin!

There is more grace in God’s heart than sin in your past. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven except the sin of rejecting God’s forgiveness. “I tell you the truth, *all* the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them.”

What is that sin that you are so concerned about, thinking that maybe you have “blasphemed” the Holy Spirit? Bring it to God right now. He will freely forgive.

ⁱ In the Old Testament one *calls on the name of the Lord* (Genesis 4:26 “At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.”); one *prophesied in the name of the Lord* (Deuteronomy 18:19-20 19 “If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death”); one *blesses the name of the Lord* (Psalm 72:19 19 “Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.”); one *trusts in the name of the Lord* (Isaiah 50:10 “Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.”). However, one must not *profane his name* (Leviticus 20:3); *blaspheme his name* (Leviticus 24:16); *curse his name* (2 Kings 2:24); *defile his name* (Ezekiel 43:8); *abuse his name* (Proverbs 30:9); *swear falsely by his name* (Leviticus 19:12).

ⁱⁱ See Exodus 33:18-19. Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ In Exodus 3:14; 6:2 God had revealed himself by his *name*, which spoke of the essence of his character. And in Exodus 33:19 we read: “And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my *name*, the LORD, in your presence.”

^{iv} *Pretending* to name the name of Christ and *falling short* of the holy life to which that name calls us are two entirely different things. Just because a Christian falls short of the holy life we are called to live does not mean he/she is a hypocrite. In fact, the charge of hypocrisy is actually a backhanded compliment to the Church. It reveals that fact that we have high moral standards and that these cannot be lived out apart from the power of Christ working within us.

^v Robert J. Morgan, 640. See Col 3:8-10 – “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices “(NIV).

^{vi} See also Matthew 12:31-32; Luke 12:10. Mark gives a narrative context what Luke only records as a series of sayings dealing with the Son of Man or the Holy Spirit. Matthew seems to combine the accounts in Mark and Luke, but omits the helpful explanation found in Mark 3:30.

^{vii} Matthew 12:28 says that Jesus had been casting out demons *by the power of the Holy Spirit*.

^{viii} Take the Apostle Paul, for example. Before his conversion, when he was still called Saul, he was a persecutor of Christians. In Acts 26:11 he even says that he tried to get Christians to blaspheme! But in doing this, did Paul commit the unpardonable sin? Evidently he didn't. Here's what he says in writing to Timothy: “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 1:13, 14). Paul writes that he “acted ignorantly in unbelief” and as a result received mercy. Paul was a murderer. He had the blood of Christians on his hands. But he received mercy. And you can too. Remember, there is always more grace in God's heart than sin in your past. It is there for the taking.

^{ix} Let's consider Saul again, the one who tried to get Christians to blaspheme. Let's suppose that while Saul was on that road to Damascus and heard the risen Christ speaking to him, that he simply said, “No, I don't believe. I refuse to believe.” That would have been the unpardonable sin. Why? Such unbelief is unpardonable precisely because it refuses to accept God's pardon. Such unbelief is unforgivable because it refuses to accept God's forgiveness.