

# What is in swearing?

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Tom was badly in need of a thousand bucks and requested his church friend Johnny to spare the money if he could. Johnny didn't have the money, so, together they went to Jacob, another member of their church. Jacob offered the money, but insisted on getting it back the next day. Tom said, yes! "I swear, my friend, in the name of our God... that if there is a morrow, I will return the money!" Johnny was a bit upset to hear Tom swearing. "Hey Tom, you return the money tomorrow, but don't swear in the name of God..." Johnny said, "For the Bible prohibits swearing. It says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain" Ex 20:7

Normally we mention the third commandment of the Decalogue only in relation with swearing. So we attribute lesser importance to it than the first and the second commandments. The Decalogue, or Ten Words (Deut 4:13) was given directly to all Israel by an audible and terrible voice, the voice of Yahweh, sounding like a trumpet over the multitude (Ex 19:16; 20:18). The Israelites trembled before the voice of the Lord and they begged that God would speak no more directly, but through Moses. The rest of the Law was then given through Moses, but the heart of the Law had already been given in the Decalogue. All the other laws were a Godly explanation of the Decalogue. So, it is necessary to see the Decalogue as a single unit. All commands have equal importance. Nevertheless, the consequence of breaking this law is given more emphasis than the others.

"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* (Ex 20:7- RSV). Why is God so wrathful when somebody breaks this particular law? May be it is because this is something directly against God himself. Look at the other laws... Remember the Sabbath day, honor your parents, shall not kill, shall not commit adultery, shall not steal, shall not bear false witness, shall not covet... God is not directly involved in any of these laws. Even in the case of the first two laws, where serving other gods and making of molten images are forbidden, God's name is not directly defamed, even though it is a grave rejection of the eternal truth about God! However, here, the defiler takes up the name of the Lord directly. It is something like a culprit tarnishing the name of the magistrate himself. A severe penalty is pronounced for those who break this law. God himself will be the avenger for the defilers. So, *the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.*

The Jewish Rabbis strictly warned the people of Israel not to break an oath if they made a swearing in the name of the Lord. False swearing is condemned in Lev 19:12 as a profanation of the name of Yahweh. The word prohibits all employment of the name of God in 'vain'.

Why is God Yahweh called "I am who I am?" It is because He cannot be compared with some body, or something else. When Moses was commissioned by God to reach his people with the message of redemption, to tell them that the "God of their fathers" has sent him to be an agent of the mighty redemption work, he was somewhat skeptic. How would the Israelites respond to the phrase the "God of their fathers"? They were in captivity for more than four centuries. There is no reason to believe that the Israelites as a whole were zealous in their faith. (Remember, the fourth or fifth generation Pentecostals who have all the opportunities for living the faith of their forefathers failed in their race). How then, can we expect this of Jacob's sons, who had never been serious about handing their religion and faith over to the fifteenth or sixteenth generation? May be a minority was holding the faith close to their heart, but the majority was ignorant about the faith of their fathers. I am sure many of the Israelites were idol worshippers, who worshipped the bull god of Egypt. That must be the reason Aaron could easily make a "golden calf" when the mischievous Israelites wanted a god to walk before them. Remember what Joshua said to the people of Israel when they were about to settle in Canaan: "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. *Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt*, and serve the LORD (Josh 24:14).

If Moses goes to the Israelites in the name of the "God of their fathers," they would ask: "God of our fathers? Who is he? What is he like? Is he like the sun god? Moon god? Or, like the bull god that we worship in Egypt?" Then it would be the responsibility of Moses to explain the "God of their fathers". So Moses asked God: please Lord, I know you are the God of my fathers. But when I go to the Israelites who are ignorant about their ancestor's God, how can I reveal you to them? "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Ex 3:13)

God looked at Moses... He had pity on him! "That means you want to compare me with somebody, Moses? That is impossible! If you want to compare, you can do it only with me... I am who I am!" God said. God is always "I AM". His being is described always in present tense... All the ages were and will be present tense to Him!

God had made known the glory of His nature in His name. God said to Moses; "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you. (Ex 3:14) The name, the great I AM, was not to be abused by His

people. When we use it in 'vain', that is, using it without much reverence and fear; you break the commandment of the Lord!

The Jewish people took the law literally. They feared to "take the name of the Lord" lightly. However, at a later stage, the Rabbis limited the application of the law only to the use of the name "Yahweh". Hence, they not only tolerated, but also sanctioned the practice of swearing in common conversation as quite harmless, provided the reference to God was not directly expressed. So, instead of taking the name Yahweh, they used other words like heaven, glory and the like. Remember, the prodigal son comes back to his father, saying that he has sinned against 'heaven,' not 'God'! (Also remember our phrases like "good heavens!" and "O' my goodness!"). Jesus, however, was not for a compromise. He said, "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." Matt 5:33-37.

The word 'take' does not mean just "to utter" here. A different meaning is attached to these words by Hengstenberg, who explains them thus: 'Thou shalt not attribute (carry) nothingness to the name of Yahweh thy God. Yahweh, the I AM, who had revealed Himself as such to Israel, must not be confounded with nothingness.' The commandment, in his view, is directed against hypocrisy in general, of which the essence is falsehood. When a hypocrite uses the name of the Lord to show his false piety, he is putting God to 'nothingness,' where no real piety exists! He is a pretender. He is not real. He is using the name of the Lord 'in vain'.

The hypocrite makes a profession of God's name, but doesn't live up to that profession. Those that name the name of God, hail the name of Jesus and say big "praise the Lord", but do not depart from iniquity, as that name binds them to do, name it in vain. What they say with their mouth doesn't mean anything to them. Their worship is worthless. Jesus is scolding them for their vain talking. "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.'" (Matt. 15:7-9) So the third commandment asks you to mean what you speak!

When we pray, more often than not, we pray without even thinking what we pray. We just 'heap up empty words' as the gentiles do (Matthew 6.7). The words we utter do not come to our mind, or in our heart. We utter many words which are meaningless to us. It doesn't arouse our emotions. We call Jesus 'Lord' 'Lord', but we do not know what the word

'Lord' means! Lord is somebody who rules over! Even though we call Jesus Lord, we seldom obey Him. If you call him Lord, you are His slave. Then how can you disobey him. So, if a disobeying man takes the name of the Lord, even in his prayers, he is profaning the name of the Lord!

Many people think they can manipulate God through their oblations. That is an Eastern thinking, not a Biblical one. Religious observances are worthless, if we fail to observe the commandments of the Lord. A sinful man cannot manipulate God, even with long fasting and prayers.

The Israelites always came to the temple of God with many sacrifices. However, God was displeased with their offerings: "The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? *Stop bringing meaningless offerings!* Your incense is detestable to me....(Isaiah 1. 11-13)

God says He cannot bear their evil assemblies. "They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen." He said.

Why was God reluctant to receive the sacrifices and offerings of the Israelites? He gives the reason: "When you spread out your hands in prayer... Your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:15).

When you stretch your hands towards heavens, it should be clean; or, you are taking the name of the Lord in vain. Your prayers would be unheard! Isaiah again tells about the people who thought they could manipulate God through fasting: 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?' "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. (Isaiah 58:3-5).

So God asks Israel to "wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:16, 17). He also asks people to go to Him for 'reasoning!' The verse can be better translated like this- "Come now, *let us settle the matter,*" says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" v. 18.

So, when you call Jesus 'Lord', 'Lord' without "settling the matter" with Him, you are taking the name of the Lord in vain. If you take the name of the Lord in vain, your worship is in vain, your prayers are in vain and even your fasting is in vain!

So, when some one pretends to be spiritual, where in reality he is worldly, he is taking the name of the Lord in vain. Even without uttering, you can profane the name of the Lord! Your life may be a profanation to the name of the Lord, if you are living it in an unworthy manner. We are supposed to live a life that is worthy of our calling. Paul is pleading with us to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Eph 4:1-3. When we fail to live a life that is "worthy of the call" that we received, either by rebellion or by carelessness, we are profaning the name of the Lord!

Do not be deceived, thinking that the third command speaks only on uttering the name of the Lord in swearing. It is calling Him Lord, Lord, when your heart is empty. When a believer finds no yes in his yes, he is profaning the name of the Lord. It is also offering oblations without purity in life! If you do that, your sacrifice would be like Cain's sacrifice! God hates pretenders. When you act religious where in reality your piety is void, you put God's name in nothingness. Remember, our God is a zealous God. "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.*"

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