

Bearing God's Name

Exodus 20:7

NOTES:

The first two commandments are clearly foundational to Christians, but the third commandment gets minimized to prohibiting a few words. But this is not the commandment about cussing. It applies comprehensively to how we live in the Lord. God identifies Himself with us as we bear His name. It's true that we shouldn't be flippant with God's name, but this is because we are living abundantly in Him in every way.

What It Means to Bear His Name

When God calls us into relationship He places His name upon us: "So shall they put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them (Num. 6:27; cf. 2 Chron. 11:14). God names Jacob after Himself: "And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). The word translated *take* in verse 7 is used when Aaron bears two onyx stones on his shoulders representing the tribes of Israel (Ex. 28:12). It's also used when Jacob has Joseph swear to *carry* him out of Egypt after he dies (Gen. 47:30). To take or bear God's name means to have His name upon you. The people of God are first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26). We are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). We bear other names marking our family, city, state, country, affinity groups and so on, but we are fundamentally marked as Christians, bearing the triune name of God. We call on His name and are saved, and irreversibly marked by His name in baptism (Rom. 10:13; Acts 2:38). Naming is an act of authority, and so God calls us as His special treasure and chosen people. The reason why you can bear His name in vain is because it has been objectively put on you.

How to Bear His Name in Vain

Since we bear God's name, He forbids us bearing it in vain, in an empty, worthless, contradictory, or blasphemous way. The first commandment prohibits believing in false gods, and the second forbids making and worshipping falsely through images. The third commandment prevents us from living in false way. The progression goes from belief to worship to life. It's not enough to clear out the idols and ban images. We also must not bear His name in vain. Here are four ways we violate this command.

1. *Refusing to Witness with Words and Works* Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Matt. 5:13). Salt provides flavor and preservation, and so when Christians don't proclaim and testify to the work of Christ, the world is dark and falling apart. If Jesus makes no difference in what we say and do, we bear His name in vain: "They profess that they know God; but by their works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate" (Tit. 1:16).

Bearing God's Name

Exodus 20:7

2. *Trusting in Ourselves* Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector at prayer to people who trusted in themselves for righteousness and despised others (Lk. 18:9-14). This vanity is often masked carefully in orthodox prayers, but you can see it in a lack of hunger and need for God's daily mercy and guidance.
3. *Using God's Name Irreverently or Without Thinking* We should be more offended by God's name used in vain than any four-letter word, vulgarity or obscenity. Euphemisms like *gosh* are not the same thing as using God's name in vain, but it can sound like you really want to. "O Lord", "Good God", "Thank God", "Praise God", "Thank you Jesus", "OMG", "I swear to God", "Hallelujah" and the like, unless used conscientiously speaking to or about the Lord, dishonor His name. Christians who want to sound pious by working God's name into everyday phrases are horribly counterproductive.
4. *Heaping Up Religious Words* "O Lord, God, I just pray, Father, that you would, Father, hear my prayer for Jesus' sake. Father...." This overlaps with the previous point, but here the person is very intentional, at least in principle before the prayer runs away. Jesus says not to be like the hypocrites who pray in public because they like to be seen by men. He also forbids using vain repetitions like the Gentiles who think they are heard for their many words (Matt. 6:5-7; cf. Matt. 7:21-23). "For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few" (Eccl. 5:2).
5. *Claiming God's Authority* When someone claims to speak for God—"the Lord told me"—he has to be right every time or be treated as a false prophet (Deut. 18:20-22). When a Christian has false certainty that he "knows" what God says or wants through some sort of special revelation outside of Scripture, he is using God's name in vain in a serious way.
6. *Conflating God's Name with False gods* If you say "God bless America!", you ought to be addressing the triune God. The god of American civil religion is an idol, and Christians ought to know better than to worship him.

Rightly Bearing God's Name

God puts His name on us so that we would thrive in Him. We hallow His name (Matt. 6:9), give the glory due unto His name (Ps. 29:2), sing out the honor of His name (Ps. 66:2), and whatever we do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Col. 3:17).