

The Ten Commandments for today

3. "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain"

Gordon Rawlings

THE ABOVE WORDS are part of the third commandment and are found in Exodus 20:7. This commandment follows as a natural progression in stating what the attitude of the people of Israel should be to the Lord God. He had taken His people out of Egypt in a miraculous way; therefore, as the first commandment says, they were not to worship other gods. The second commandment added to this in that the people were not to make any idol to worship instead of, or in addition to, the Lord God.

The Name of God reveals His character; in general terms, that He is loving and merciful, but also a God of judgement because of His righteousness. It also relates to His purpose to be manifested, not only in the Lord Jesus Christ, but in His faithful sons and daughters in Christ. The people of Israel were taught the meaning of the Name so that they might reflect His character. They had an obligation to reverence His Name, as is the case with ourselves as spiritual Israel.

"In vain" in this verse means that the people were not to use God's Name falsely, or lightly and rashly. Leviticus 19:12 forbids both the deceitful and the flippant use of the Divine Name: "And ye shall not swear by My name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the LORD". So, taking the Name of the Lord in vain has two aspects: swearing by His Name falsely and profaning His Name. Whilst to profane the Name of the Lord God is included in the swearing aspect, it also has a wider meaning.

We will first have a brief look at the swearing aspect. To swear is to take an oath. One example is the request of Rahab to the spies to swear unto her by the Lord that they would save alive her family when Jericho was destroyed. That oath was kept. God commanded that such oaths were not to be broken or profaned. In other words, they were not to be made in vain or falsely, lightly and rashly. A vow had the force of an oath, and these had to be kept. This is clear from Numbers 30:2 and other verses in this chapter. Verse 2 reads: "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break [or profane] his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth". If such

vows were not kept, the man would be taking God's Name in vain, and, as stated in Exodus 20:7, he would not be held guiltless.

The application to us is given in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:33-37. In verse 33 Jesus refers back to the third commandment and goes on to teach us that we should not swear at all, but restrict ourselves in this context to 'yes' and 'no'. In 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul refers to false swearers or perjurers in the context of the lawless and disobedient.

So we move on to the aspect of not profaning the Name of the Lord in ways other than by swearing. To profane means to make common, to pollute, not to respect religious practice, and, in our context, not to respect the Name of the Lord God. It includes the blasphemous use of the God's Name, speaking irreverently about Him and about sacred things.

Flippant use of God's Name is forbidden, therefore. In Leviticus 24:10-16 there is the record of the Israelitish woman's son who blasphemed the Name of the Lord and cursed. God's edict was, "Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin. And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death" (vv. 15,16). There was no offering a blasphemer could make to cover his sin; it was a capital offence. Similarly in the New Testament Jesus states that blasphemy or railing against the power of the Holy Spirit is not forgivable. Other ways in which the Name of God is profaned or made common by being treated lightly (in vain) are seen in Ezekiel 22:26. Here Israel's priests are in error: "[they] have profaned Mine holy things . . . neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them".

The overall exhortation to us from what we have noted is to hallow the Lord's Name as instructed in the Lord's Prayer. Psalm 96 is also instructive in this respect: "Give unto the LORD the glory due unto His name . . . O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness" (vv. 8,9). If we are sincere in this we shall not allow ourselves to misuse the Name of the Lord God falsely, lightly and rashly, as many people around us do.