

# Do Not Take God's Name in Vain

## The Weight and Wonder of the Third Commandment

Cities Church | Saint Paul, Minnesota

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- Resource by

John Piper

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Coming to Cities Church is like a homecoming. It's *like* a homecoming. Being invited back to preach at Bethlehem Baptist Church *is* a homecoming. But this is like a homecoming because your preaching pastors (Jonathan, David, and Joe) and I don't just share years of friendship and ministry, but also share a theological home. You can read a summary of it in your "Elder Affirmation of Faith" online because the Cities Church website links to it as the uniting document of the elders and pastors here.

So, to see God's hand on your church for these five years, and to see him bring you, in his mercy and power, to this milestone of having your own base of operations at 1524 Summit Avenue, is a deep pleasure for me, because it means that the vision of God that I live for — that we live for — has another foothold in these cities. Another people and place are devoted to the mission of making the majesty of Christ known and treasured in these cities.

## Mind Your Mission

There is nothing more important than that God in Christ be seen and savored, and shown, for who he really is in all the peoples of the world — including you, and those to whom you are sent as the salt of the earth. Your part in this mission should thrill you.

But you might need to be reminded that your mission — the mission being presented to you in the Ten Commandments — is so utterly *countercultural*, and so deeply *counterintuitive* for ordinary folks in the Twin Cities, and so *offensive* to people whose happiness has never

reckoned with God's infinite value, and so *shocking* in the way God speaks, that it will take a miracle — many miracles — for anyone to understand, and believe, and love what you are about in this church.

And yet that mission — your mission — shining out of the Ten Commandments, is more wonderful, more beautiful, more valuable, more durable, more satisfying than anything these Twin Cities have ever achieved or dreamed.

## **For Your Ever-Increasing Joy**

Now, there's a bridge between my gladness over your church and its mission and the text that I have been assigned from the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:7. And that bridge is found in paragraph 3 of that "Affirmation of Faith" where your pastors and I find our theological home. Paragraph 3 of the affirmation says,

We believe that God, from all eternity, in order to display the full extent of his glory for the eternal and ever-increasing enjoyment of all who love him, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his will, freely and unchangeably ordain and foreknow whatever comes to pass.

We believe that God upholds and governs all things — from galaxies to subatomic particles, from the forces of nature to the movements of nations, and from the public plans of politicians to the secret acts of solitary persons — all in accord with his eternal, all-wise purposes to glorify himself, yet in such a way that he never sins, nor ever condemns a person unjustly; but that his ordaining and governing all things is compatible with the moral accountability of all persons created in his image.

Notice two expressions of a single theme, which brings us the first three commandments of the Ten Commandments.

1. God ordained all that comes to pass *to display the full extent of his glory*.
2. God governs all things *in accord with his eternal, all-wise purposes to glorify himself*.

God ordained all things to display God. God governs all things to glorify God. And, as the affirmation says, this radical God-centeredness of God is for the eternal and ever-increasing joy of all who love him.

## **Sweeping God-Centeredness**

With that, we have landed square in the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 20:3: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

*No gods before me in my presence. No gods before me in your priorities. Me alone. Me supreme.* This is God talking. This is God, demanding that God be exalted above everyone and everything in the thoughts and emotions and actions of all human beings. This is God’s sweeping God-centeredness.

### **You Serve a Jealous God**

Exodus 20:4–6: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth

generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

The most foundational statement (verse 5): “I am a jealous God.” *My burning jealousy visits iniquity on the heads of those who bow to images, serve images, love images, obey images, and hate me. I am jealous for your bowing, your serving, your loving, and your obeying. You belong to me. I made you.*

“I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” *You are mine. I am your God. Your Maker. Your Liberator. Your Husband. Your Father. Your Wisdom. Your King. Your Treasure. Your Life. The affections of your heart belong to me. Don’t give them to idols. Don’t commit spiritual suicide! Let my jealousy for your love hold on to you.*

Oprah Winfrey heard a sermon on the jealousy of God when she was about 27 years old, and it drove her away from biblical Christianity. I copied this down from her own testimony on YouTube:

Then [the preacher] said, “The Lord thy God is a jealous God.” I was caught up in the rapture of that moment until he said “jealous.” And something struck me. I was 27 or 28, and I was thinking, “God is all, God is omnipresent, God is . . . also *jealous*? God is jealous of me?” And something about that didn’t feel right in my spirit, because I believe that God is love, and that God is in all things.

This is what I meant when I said that the mission of this church — the vision of God you exist to see and savor and spread — the vision of the Ten Commandments, is countercultural, counterintuitive, offensive and shocking, and will require miracles from the Holy Spirit for anyone, including Oprah Winfrey, to be enthralled by this God.

## Supreme Love for Jesus Alone

If the notion rises in your mind that maybe the “jealousy” of God for your heart and mind and soul and strength is an Old Testament view of God, you did not so learn Christ in this church.

Paul said to the Corinthians, “Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (1 Corinthians 10:22). And again, “I am jealous for you with God’s jealousy” (see 2 Corinthians 11:2). And Jesus said that God’s greatest commandment *now*, not just in the Old Testament but now, is *God’s* commandment about the love of God: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment” (Matthew 22:37–38). This God commands supreme love for God. That’s the New Testament expression of God’s God-centeredness.

Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37). God the Father, and God the Son, today in this room right now at Cities Church, are aflame with just as much jealousy for the totality of our heart and mind and soul and strength as they ever were in the Old Testament. Perhaps even more, because we know so much more of his greatness and beauty and worth because of Christ.

## Nominal Blasphemy

Now comes the third commandment.

Exodus 20:7: “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.”

The second half of the verse is not a command but a warning: “If you take the name of the Lord in vain, the Lord will not hold you guiltless.” In other words, guilt and punishment hang over the head of those who take the name of the Lord in vain.

That doesn’t mean there is no way for a person to repent of taking the name of the Lord in vain, and be forgiven. We know that because these very words on Mount Sinai are used again in Exodus 34:6–7:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

These are the same words as in Exodus 20:7: *God will not clear the guilty*. But they are immediately preceded by the words *forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin*. Which means that forgiveness abounds for every kind of sin against the name of God, if God’s way of repentance and faith in the substitute and sacrifice is followed — animals then; Christ today.

The call of the third commandment is this: *Turn away from taking the name of the Lord in vain. Repent, receive forgiveness, and then, by the power of God’s Spirit, be done with it. Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*

## What’s in a Name?

Let’s press into the meaning of “name” and the meaning of “in vain,” and then let the flow of thought from commandment one to two to three help us define what it means to take the name of the Lord in vain.

*The name* — what's that? What is it that we should not take in vain?

## God's Proper Name

The first focus of God's meaning is surely God's proper name that he had revealed as Moses delivered the people from Egypt, *Yahweh*, which is built on the verb "I am" (Exodus 3:14) and signifies God's absolute being: "I Am Who I Am" — *no beginning, no ending, no becoming, no dependence on anything outside myself. That's my name*. Everywhere you see Lord with small caps in the ESV, that's what you should think — over 6,000 times in the Old Testament.

We know this is foremost in God's mind because he has made it so prominent:

- Exodus 20:2: "I am Yahweh your God."
- Exodus 20:5: "I Yahweh your God am a jealous God."
- Exodus 20:7: "You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain."

So, the first and most obvious focus of *name* in verse 7 is *Yahweh*. "I Am Who I Am" — don't take that name in vain.

## Names Express Reality

But the very fact that the name *Yahweh* has a meaning reminds us that, in the Bible, someone's name tells decisive things about the person. They are not mere labels that help you distinguish one person from another. They are expressions of a person's reality.

For example, here in verse 5, it says, "I Yahweh your God am a jealous God." So, jealousy is part of his reality. And when we get to Exodus 34:14, here is what we read: "You shall



worship no other god, for Yahweh, *whose name is Jealous*, is a jealous God.” It was a description of reality in Exodus 20:5. Now in Exodus 34:14, it is his name. And so it is throughout the Bible.

- Isaiah 57:15: “Thus says the One . . . who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy.” That’s his reality. So, that’s his name.
- Isaiah 9:6: “To us a child is born, to us a son is given; . . . his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” That’s his reality. So, that’s his name.
- Matthew 1:21: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” His reality is a Savior. So, his name is *Yeshua*, Jesus, one who saves.
- Revelation 19:13, 16: “The name by which he is called is The Word of God. . . . On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” That is who he is, his reality, Word of God, King of kings, Lord of lords. So, those are his name.

So, “don’t take the name of Yahweh your God in vain,” means “don’t take God, or anything that his name expresses about his reality, in vain. God is I Am, absolute being, Jealous, Holy, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Jesus, Word of God, King of kings, Lord of lords, “the Alpha and the Omega” (Revelation 21:6). That is who he is, his name, his reality, his God-ness. Don’t take him or any aspect of his being, his name, in vain.

## Vanity of Vanities

*Take in vain* — what does that mean?

To “take” some revelation of the reality of God into our minds and to have *thoughts* about him “in vain.” To take some revelation of the way God is into our hearts and have *feelings* about him “in vain.” To take some expression of God’s reality into our mouths and speak words about him in vain! To take some revelation of God into our resolves to do *actions* in this name “in vain.” What does that mean: to treat God, his name, in our *thoughts* or our *feelings* or our *words* or our *actions* “in vain”? What does that mean?

### **Futile, Empty, Pointless**

The meaning of this phrase “in vain” in Exodus 20:7 is really quite plain when you just look up the uses in the Old Testament and then cap it off with a word from Jesus. Listen to these uses:

- Jeremiah 2:30: “In vain have I struck your children; but they took no correction.”
- Jeremiah 4:30: “In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you.”
- Jeremiah 6:29: “In vain the refining goes on, for the wicked are not removed.”
- Jeremiah 46:11: “In vain you have used many medicines; there is no healing for you.”
- Malachi 3:14: “You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge?’”

So, “in vain” means spank the children: futile, empty, no correction. Put on makeup: futile empty, no lovers. Put the wicked through the refiner’s fire: futile, empty, no repentance. Take the medicine: futile, empty, pointless, no healing. Serve God: futile, empty, no profit. “In vain”: futile, pointless, empty, no profit, no success, wasted.

### **Everything in Jesus’s Name**

So, the question becomes: How do you take the name of God (expressions of his reality) into your thoughts, and into your emotions, and into your words, and into your actions in such a way that your thoughts and feelings and words and actions are futile, empty, pointless, wasted?

Jesus gives us a double answer in Matthew 15:8–9. And he’s not leaving the Old Testament (Isaiah 29:13); he’s quoting it.

This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me;  
*in vain* do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

This is about worship. But what it teaches applies to all of life, because, for the Christian, all of life is worship (Romans 12:1–2). “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do *all* to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do *everything* in the *name* of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17).

## **Wasted Worship**

Jesus says there are two things that happen to cause the worship of God — the name of God — to be empty, futile, pointless, wasted.

1. “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” The heart is emptied of affections for God, for his name — love, admiration, reverence, cherishing, treasuring.

2. The second thing that makes the worship “in vain” (Matthew 15:9) is that “they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Words, statements about God, have been emptied of God’s truth, and replaced with human opinions.

When the heart is emptied of *affections* for God, and words are emptied of the *truth* of God, all thoughts, all words, all emotions, and all acts are empty, pointless, futile, in vain. Therefore, to take the name of God in vain is to take up some expression of God’s reality into our thoughts or emotions or words or actions when the truth of God has gone out of them, and true affections for God are missing.

If you thought I was going to address cuss words in this sermon, like “God damn!” and “Jesus Christ!” and “Oh my God!” (OMG, I forgot to comb my hair!), well, I have — if you have ears to hear. The elimination of that kind of use of the name of God is the kindergarten of the school of Christ. If you still have kindergarten behaviors, here’s the remedy: fill your words with the weight of God’s truth, and fill your hearts with affections for his name.

## **‘For His Name’s Sake’**

Now back to the first three of the Ten Commandments.

Recall the countercultural, counterintuitive, offensive, shocking language of God: *Nothing above me in your thoughts and affections and words and actions. No carved substitutes that steal away your thoughts and affections and words and actions. For I am jealous to have all your heart, and all your mind, and all your soul, and all your strength.*

*So, don't treat me — my name — as empty, futile, pointless, trivial, inconsequential, insignificant. Don't let your words be empty of my truth. Don't let your hearts be empty of your affections. Revere me. Love me. Trust me. Treasure me. Satisfy your heart with me.*

What Oprah failed to see when she took offense at the jealousy of God was that God's jealousy for his name — his jealousy to be supreme in our affections — is our salvation and our joy.

For your name's sake, O Lord,  
pardon my guilt, for it is great. (Psalm 25:11)

Deliver us, and atone for our sins,  
for your name's sake! (Psalm 79:9)

He saved them for his name's sake. (Psalm 106:8)

You have a great calling, Cities Church. So countercultural, counterintuitive, offensive, and shocking, that only with a miracle will people see that it is good news.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower;  
the righteous man runs into it and is safe. (Proverbs 18:10)

Don't treat this tower like a crumbling shack. It's not. It is your life