

What's in a Name?

Throughout history, and in most cultures, a person's name was one of the most prized possessions. Up until no more than two or three generations ago, even in this country, a man's name, his honor, and his word were immutable strands of the fabric of which his character and self worth were formed. In the old Roman and Greek cultures, and perhaps other cultures, the sons of wealthy and titled, as soon as they were weaned, were given over with essentially full authority, usually to educated slave governesses or governors who would rear, educate and disciple them until they reached the age of accountability. Only then, were they allowed to take the family name. This was formalized by an official, and legal adoption of the child into the family and celebrated much like a Bar Mitzvah. In more recent times, when an adult child drifted too far from his parental religion or tradition, so as to adversely reflect on the family name, he could in many cultures, be "disowned" or stripped of that valued family name and its lifelong benefits. Scripture is replete with many evidences of the importance of the family name. Essentially every person mentioned in Scripture had a name of some individual significance and often of inspired or prophetic origin. Even God Himself changed the names of some of those He called, as each rose to the occasion of His purpose, such as, Abram, to Abraham, (from high father to father of multitudes), Sari, to Sarah, (from diminutive to female noble, queen), Jacob to Israel (from supplanter to he will rule as god), Saul to Paul (from inquirer to little).

Scripture speaks very emphatically to us that God Himself attaches great value to His name. For example, in Samuel 12:22 we are told that "God will not forsake His people for His great name sake." In Psalm 23:3 we here, "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name sake." We see, "For Thy name sake" in Psalms 25, 106, 109 and 143. In Isaiah 48:9 our Lord says, "...My name sake will defer my anger." In Jeremiah 14:7 and again in verse 21 we find "...for Thy name sake." In Ezekiel 20:9 and again in verse 22, we see "I wrought for My name sake." And in Ezekiel 36:22 God says, for "My Holy name sake." This type of exhortation occurs as least 12 times in the Old Testament making it very clear how God feels about His name.

Therefore, it should be no surprise that the third Commandment, right after the two about not having any other gods and not making idols, attests to the importance to Him of His name. The third Commandment reads: “Thou shall not take the name of thy Lord God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain” (Exodus 20:7, Deuteronomy 5:11). Taking the Lord’s name in vain; do we really know what that means? Of course, who doesn’t? It simply means cursing or swearing and using His name Jesus and His title Christ as part of a vocabulary of profanities, whether it is disparagingly or in anger, hate, frustration, despair or just casual or habitual vulgarness. Surely, such utterances are sinful as are all things contrary to God’s will. But is that what God had in mind when He carved that commandment on the stone tablets He gave to Moses? I think not, at least not the principal meaning.

The ancient Hebrews took this commandment most seriously, so much so that they would not even speak His name, under any circumstances, both out of great reverence and out of fear that somehow God would interpret it as having been spoken in vain. It has been said that in some of their writings, they would even leave a blank space instead of writing His name. Or as was more common, they substituted a tetragrammaton in the text instead of His name. However, by never speaking His name, its pronunciation was lost. All that is left are these four letter equivalents of His name, in Hebrew transliterated as JHVH, IHVH, JHWH, YHVH and YHWH. Adding vowels to these, they became pronounceable yielding the equivalent names such as Elohim, Yahweh, and Jehovah, etc. But we now know Him by His new name Jesus Christ, which is quite pronounceable, yet no less sacred.

In order to get a better understanding of what our Lord meant by the commandment, let us examine the Hebrew meaning of three key words, “take,” “name” and “vain”. The word “take” appears 587 times spelled out in the King James Version of the Old Testament of which there are 35 different Hebrew words that have been so translated. The applicable one here in Exodus 20:7 is “nasa”. It has a variety of related meanings with the first listed being “accept”, with “take” being near the end of the list of related

meanings such as, advance, arise, suffer to, extol, take. From this analysis and for reasons developed hereinafter it seems reasonable to conclude that this particular word “nasa” is used more because of its first and prime meaning, “*accept*” rather than in any other sense of the idea of taking. I believe this most closely relates to what our Lord intended, “Thou shalt not *accept* the name of thy Lord God in vain. At this point this subtlety may seem like nit picking, but read on, it may not be. The word “name” appears 741 times in the Old Testament, and all but twice it is translated from the Hebrew word, sham, which is defined as the idea of definite and conspicuous position, appreciation as a mark or memorial of individuality, honor, authority, characters

The word ‘vain’ appears 86 times in the King James Version of the Old Testament, and there are 15 different Hebrew words that have been so translated. The applicable one here is “shav”. According to Strong’s concordance, it means, “desolating, evil, ruin, guile, and idolatry, as false, deceptive, lying and lastly vain.” From this it seems more in the context of the commandment to use “falsely or “deceptively” as the meaning of “shav.” Thus, we could perhaps more accurately translate the commandments. As “Thou shalt not accept the name of the thy Lord God deceptively.” Tradition and long established mindsets are difficult to change or even to want to change. But the words “take” and “vain” simply do not, in our current understanding of their meaning, convey the full strength of the message God gave us on those tablets of stone. Those who thought and spoke in the original Hebrew better understood the fuller, more inclusive meaning of this commandment than we do strictly from the common English translation.

It is the unfortunate choice of the translators, along with the limiting capacity of the English language to convey the nuances, the subtle distinctions of certain words, which cause many of the difficulties associated with really understanding God’s Word.

Knowing that this would happen, our Lord took good care to carefully preserve, with great accuracy, the originally inspired writings of the Scripture in the original Hebrew and Greek language, where we could rediscover whatever meanings may have been lost and thereby enrich our knowledge of His Word and of how we could better live by His Commandments.

With all this in mind, let's see what profanity our Lord had in mind here that is beyond and more important than abusing His name by cursing. As part of God's plan for the redemption of mankind, God chose Abraham through whom to grow a people to represent Him, in His name. It was from these people that the "seed of the woman" would come to redeem the world. It is not that Abraham, or "His people" were any better than anyone else, or any other group. It was simply by His sovereign will that He chose this way to fulfill His plan. By accepting His name as His people, God promised them a special land and a good life, provided that they obeyed His commandments. It was their lack of obedience to His commandments, their lack of living as His people, by His name, which defiled His name and for which they, as a particular people, were repeatedly punished. The previously referenced Scriptural verses attest to this and to this underlying theme regarding God's concern for His name.

What does this have to do with us in this present age? Everything, because nothing has changed, except that we now know God by another, most sacred and valued name, Jesus Christ. There is now an additional chosen people with a different purpose and a different destiny. They are called Christians because they have taken His name. This is what it is all about! He has, by His blood, provided eternal life in Heaven, for all who believe in Him and accept His name thereby calling themselves Christians. In order to legitimately and effectively have His name; they must be born-again into His family. To become true members of His family, with all benefits to be derived there from, they must be adopted into His family to become His sons and daughters, just as did the sons and daughters of the old cultures mentioned earlier. His pre-requisites for this adoption are, true and lasting faith in Him and in the power of the cross, followed by a continuous, sincere and concerted attempt at obedience to all of His precept and commandments as Jesus embellished them in the Sermon on the Mount. To accept the authority, and ambassadorship of the family of Christ, requires love, commitment and obedience. It must not be used vacuously. Only by representing Him in a manner consistent with His Word and in accordance with His will, can they rightfully accept His name without doing so deceptively, or falsely.

If one believes that “take” is as good as “accept” and “vain” is as good as “falsely”, that is fine. The only important thing is that one understands the deeper meaning of those words, if one has chosen to call ones self a Christian. It is a grave responsibility having eternal consequences. Those who accept Him, and assume His name, have become sons and daughters of God, and are thereby expected to honor His name by their thoughts, words, and actions. Whenever they violate the Father’s Word, in any manner, they dishonor Him, and they dishonor His name as well as His family’s name, which is called Christian. This is accepting His name falsely. This is taking His name in vain. This is violating the third Commandment.