



LOVE GOD

OBEY GOD

Ripe for Abuse

There are a few areas of life ripe for abuse. They are areas often cheated of truthfulness. Something about these areas beckons dishonesty.

Paying taxes

Selling goods

Reporting accomplishments

And one more...

Loving God

It bothers us deeply that it's true...but it is true...loving God is one of those areas ripe for abuse, ripe for hypocrisy. It's an area of life often cheated of truthfulness.

Why?

Maybe because lip service comes easy. It's easy to check the God box. Some check it boldly. They fill their lives with activities associated with church or a good cause. They feel good about themselves, because they're clearly distinguished from those who check the box lightly. *"Those are the hypocrites,"* they think to themselves. *"They do just enough to get by. They're not like us. We're committed. We're really into it."*

Danger.

Why?

Consider Christ's strongest words. Were his strongest words for those blatantly rebelling against God? Not at all. Christ's strongest words were for those who checked the God box with great fanfare and boldness, the religious leaders of his day.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

(Matthew 23:15)

Ouch! Not only does he refer to them as *sons of hell*, but he levels them with the "h" word. *"You hypocrites!"* he says. Lip service and activities are one thing. An authentically devoted heart is another. It's an old problem. God addressed it early in Scripture's story.

Take the Name

Scripture is often misunderstood. One such misunderstanding involves the third commandment.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.
Exodus 20:7 (NASB)

The above is often quoted against using the name “God” as an expression. “Don’t take God’s name in vain,” Grandma tells us. Without question, using “God” to curse is against the teaching of Scripture. Nothing said here is meant to advocate speaking the name “God” as an expression of frustration. To do so is careless, offensive, and wrong, and many professing followers of Christ do so without thinking. With that said, though, inappropriate speaking of the name “God” is not the concern of this commandment. Let’s give it a careful read.

What does it mean to “take the name of the LORD your God in vain”?

For starters, note that all the letters of LORD are capitalized. This is meant to tip us off. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there are two words we translate Lord: *Adonai* and *Yahweh*. *Adonai* is the general term for Lord. It is used of masters, bosses, and leaders. Translators let us know the Hebrew word underneath the English *Lord* is *Adonai* by using lower case letters: Lord.

Yahweh carries much more weight. It is a derivative of God’s description of himself to Moses. When asked his name, God said to Moses, “*I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*” (Exodus 3:14). Moses did as God instructed and referred to God as *Yahweh*, a derivative of the Hebrew verb for *I am*. It is a unique name of God himself. And here’s how English Bibles tip us off. *Yahweh* is translated in capital letters: LORD.

The New Testament is in Greek and doesn’t have this same distinction, but here at the third commandment, we’re told to not take the name *Yahweh* in vain.

That helps. There’s more.

What does it mean to “take” a name?

The Hebrew word here is *Nasa*. *Nasa* is translated as take, carry, lift, lift up, bear, or bear up. Contrast this with another Hebrew word: *Amar*. *Amar* is translated to *speak*, to *say*. If this command was just about speaking God’s name, we would expect the Hebrew word *Amar*. We don’t get *Amar*. We get *Nasa*.

Consider this...

What does it mean to “lift” a name?

What does it mean to “carry” a name?

What does it mean to “bear” a name?

When we lift a name, carry a name, or bear a name, we take that name as our own. We identify with that name. When we bear a name, we proclaim to the world that we want to be associated with that name. When a bride chooses to take the name of her groom, the action could be described by *Nasa*. She bears the new name.

What would God be after by stating, “Don’t carry the name *Yahweh* in vain”?

Or what might God’s passion be when he says, “Don’t bear the name *Yahweh* in vain”?

To take a name, bear a name, or carry a name is to be associated with that name. God’s concern? “*Don’t associate with my name in vain. Don’t claim to carry my name but have it take no*



effect in your life. Don't bear my name, carry my name, take my name as your own but in your heart of hearts have no real interest in me."

God's concern?

Hypocrisy. Disobedience.

To carry the name Yahweh in vain is to give lip service but lack a truly dedicated heart.

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

(Isaiah 29:13)

Lips say one thing.

Lives reveal another.

Christ put it like this, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Or he could have said, "Why are you taking my name in vain? You say I'm your Lord, but your actions say otherwise."

It's no wonder, then, that Scripture makes love for God synonymous with obedience. John stated this succinctly: "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3).

The Magic Wand

But we hold the magic wand, right? Obedience is good, but it's not obligatory. We're saved by grace. The cross covers all that. Wave the magic wand of grace, and we need not worry about hypocrisy. Let's not get legalistic. Let's not say obedience is needed. Wouldn't that contradict the message of the cross? Don't we say we're saved by grace and not by works? If we make obedience obligatory, aren't we compromising grace? Aren't we saying the cross isn't really needed?

Not exactly.

Actually, not at all.

The cross of Christ could be likened to a key that opens a door. The purpose of the key is to allow the key holder to enter into a room. If that person has no interest in going into that room, the key is effectively useless for that person.

That to say, the cross is for those who want to live their lives in God's presence—they want to enter the room—but they cannot do so due to the offense of their sin. They see life. Life is found living and walking with God as their God, but they cannot approach this God on their own. On their own, their sin is an offense to this God they genuinely want to know, experience, and walk with day by day. The cross deals with the offense so they can live and walk and breathe with the God that they love.

The cross is not for those who want to live their lives running from God's presence and God's ways. Why hold the key for a room the holder of the key wants to run from? That key is not needed or useful if the room is unwanted. The wondrous gift of the cross is the gift of grace and forgiveness for those who want God to be their God. The cross is useless to those pursuing another god even if they're pretending God is their God. Their true god, whatever it may be, is accessible through other means. If their god is riches, then riches come through hard work, not the cross. If their god is unbridled sexual expression, then they do not need the cross to get



this. The person who takes God's name in vain does not need the cross to get to their true god any more than the person on the street needs the door for a building they have no intention of entering. The cross brings awe-inspiring grace and forgiveness for those who want the presence of God in their lives.

Scripture puts it like this:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
(Hebrews 4:16)

Why claim grace, why claim the cross, if you don't truly want to approach the God of that grace? Why flaunt the key to the room you never intend to enter? If you want to run from God—disobey God—the cross is not needed for that. The cross makes available the ongoing presence of God for those who want the ongoing presence of God, those who want to follow God, those who want to obey God. It is the most stunning gift available.

Legalism

Let's get practical.

Broadly speaking, hypocrisy comes in two stripes.

First, there's *legalism*. Legalists are those of us who know the trappings of faith, but at our core, are still trusting in something other than God. Commonly, we put our trust in ourselves. This is those of us who look to our own strength rather than the strength of God. We may attend church, but church attendance is a point of pride rather than gathering with others to lean into God for strength and guidance. We may know and read the Bible, but as with church attendance, knowing Scripture inflates our ego rather than feeding our souls. We may even support the church financially, at times with large checks; but when considered honestly, these gifts to the church are not expressions of gratitude to the God we need for all things, but expressions of pride as it seems God and his church need us. Yes, we take the name of the Lord, but we do so in vain because it is only external. Internally, we trust in and look to something or someone other than God.

Jesus challenged the legalist with this:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.
(Matthew 23:27)

License

The second type of hypocrisy is *licentiousness*. The licentious are those who view grace as a license to do what they really want to do: disobey God. It's rarely stated blatantly. More commonly, it is stated with an air of humility. Struggle with sin is thought to be a badge of authenticity. To overcome sin would compromise this authenticity, so rather than appear plastic, we revel in our sin. Reveling in sin is viewed as a deeper understanding of grace, and those who challenge this understanding are viewed as legalists. Grace no longer moves us away from sin, as grace is intended, but gives us the ability to sin, even if we pretend we don't like it. The licentious take the name of the Lord, but they miss the point of grace, and therefore



take his name in vain. Grace is no license to run from God. Grace opens the door to be close to God.

Jude challenged the licentious with this:

*For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.
(Jude 1:4)*

Story of our Lives

So what do we do with this? Clearly, self-deception abounds. The recipients of Christ's strong words were quite certain of their faith. How do we recognize the real thing? Even more, how do we recognize the real thing *in us*?

Passages of Scripture could be referenced at this point, but a clue is given by stepping back and viewing Scripture's landscape. When we do, we notice something: Scripture abounds with stories. Page after page display life after life. Many reasons could be given for this. Clearly, one of the most important reasons comes from Christ himself. Jesus said, "Each tree is recognized by its own fruit" (Luke 6:44).

In other words, we know what's inside a tree by observing the outside fruit of that tree. Stories display fruit. As God inspired Scripture, he didn't just want to tell us what it means to authentically love him; he painted pictures through stories. Through these stories, we see both authentic and inauthentic love for God put on display. The stories display fruit from lives lived before us. Seeing this fruit helps us discern our own lives as well, which leads to important questions..

What does the story of your life display?

Does the story of your life display legalism? Are you prideful about your decisions? Do you seek to obey God by faith or impress God by your goodness? Do you judge those who fall short? Do you see yourself as better than others.

Or, does the story of your life display license? Do you truly want to overcome? Do you want to obey? When you think about repeating patterns of sin in your life, do you believe obedience is both possible and desirable? Or, do you secretly love your sin, take pride in your openness with your struggles? Are you good at confession but not so good at repentance?

Condemnation vs. Conviction

As we consider these questions, a critical distinction must be made. It's the distinction between condemnation and conviction. Using different language, Paul makes this distinction when writing the church in Corinth:

I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves



to be innocent in this matter.
(2 Corinthians 7:9-11)

Godly sorrow—conviction—is a good thing. We see our sin, we want to be free from it, so we bring it to the cross, and we leave it there. Worldly sorrow—condemnation—is different than this. Condemnation is when we see our sin, and we are defeated and demoralized by it. Rather than humbly entrusting it to Christ at the cross, we hold onto our failures and let them weigh us down.

As we consider authentic obedience, we must recognize the power of the cross for forgiveness and the power of the Spirit for obedience. Paul pointed to both the death of Christ and the life of Christ when he described the new life available to us.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.
(Romans 6:1-4)

Did you hear that? We too may live a new life! There is a new life available to us. It is a life of passionately following the teachings of Scripture, not by our own strength (legalism), and not in a spirit that winks at sin (license), but by the Spirit of God, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

As you consider your struggles, you are encouraged to do so in the context of hope. Because of Jesus, and because of God's Spirit, we have hope. We can—and must—live differently. Obedience is not an obligation but an opportunity. No longer must we pretend we are better than we truly are (legalism), and no longer must we revel in the mud pit (license). New life is available to us, and it is the life for which we truly long.

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