

No Longer Slaves: raising up the Name

The next commandment is terse and uncompromising. It's also often misunderstood. Here it is in a common translation:

“You shall not take up the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold guiltless anyone who takes up his name in vain.” (Exodus 20:7)

Consider the way the Lord stresses the guilt of someone who breaks this commandment:

1. What does this imply about what is at stake?
2. What do *you* think is at stake?

In fact, in both Hebrew and Greek, the idea of “taking up” God’s name is quite broad. The Hebrew verb (*nasa*) typically points to lifting up and carrying something; the Greek (*lambano*) is about receiving, or taking something to yourself. All told, this is more than just about *mentioning* the name of the Lord in the wrong way, as we might in “swearing” in a moment of rage. Having said that ...

3. What language escapes your lips when you stub your toe badly?

To understand what it might mean to “take up” or “raise up” the name of the Lord, we need to recall the covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 19:5-6). God calls Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” - all of them, not just Moses and Aaron. As such, they are - in all that they do and say and are in the world - *bearers* of the “name”, not merely users of the name in speech. In this sense the name is not so much the Tetragrammaton “YHWH” but the divine reputation or “brand”, about which God has been revealing so much since he introduced it to Moses back in Exodus 3. It’s a brand wonderfully associated with saving power, miraculous care and provision. Take a moment to remember all that God has done since he sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh.

The point of the commandment is: don’t burn the brand, or there’ll be consequences. Build the brand, just as we pray, “Father in heaven, may your name be holy!” Consider:

4. How do we enhance the reputation of our God in the world?

There are a number of ways in which - through our words and actions - we “take up” the name of the Lord in vain, and so bring his name into disrepute. Some of these are about self-defence, shielding ourselves behind a claim about God. And some are about self-promotion, building ourselves up by association with the Lord.

To see how this plays out, read Jeremiah 28 all the way through. It’s a salutary tale of a prophet who took up the name of the Lord in vain, and of God’s prophet Jeremiah who refused to presume. Consider:

5. What might Hananiah have hoped to gain by speaking and acting as he did?
6. What does Jeremiah’s response show about how and when to “take up” the name of the Lord?

Though we do not see into the minds of either Hananiah or Jeremiah, it’s not far-fetched to see self-interest at work in the former. Either Hananiah is insecure, looking to bolster his claim to

authority in the eyes of those around Jeremiah by adding “Thus says the Lord!”, or he is arrogant and presumptuous: a shameless self-promoter.

By contrast, Jeremiah is circumspect. He doesn’t challenge Hananiah at first, even though he’s just been flatly contradicted. He waits for the Lord to speak, and only then “takes up” the name of the Lord in judgment against Hananiah.

We take up the Lord’s name vainly in self-defence when we

- a) make the Lord responsible for the consequences of our own choices (e.g. “why did the Lord let this happen?”); or
- b) claim too strongly the Lord’s sanction for our actions, e.g. “The Lord told me to ...”, so as to avoid responsibility; or
- c) claim too strongly the Lord’s word, e.g. “The Lord told me that ...”, so that we can head off the challenge of others

And we take up the Lord’s name vainly in self-promotion when we

- d) declare “the Lord is with me!” to enforce others’ compliance;
- e) insist “I’m accountable to God!” to avoid accountability to others; or
- f) assert “I know what the Lord is doing/saying/requiring” to dismiss the counsel of others

In all these ways we “burn the brand”, diminishing the authority and reputation of God’s holy name by alloying it with our own mixed motives and self-interest. Alas for fallen leaders around the Christian world who, so often with the enabling of those they have led, have wrongly taken up the name of the Lord, presuming his authority, and so have scarred many in their falling, and dimmed the Lord’s reputation in the world.

- 7. How do you take up the Lord’s name in vain?
- 8. Where is the “brand” damaged among those you know outside the church, and what can you do to “build the brand”?

Finally, read 1 Corinthians 3:5-7, where Paul counters the factionalism of the Corinthian church with a finely-drawn model of how authority works in the kingdom of God. Paul has real authority to plant, and Apollos to water, but for all that, God is the only real deal, since he’s the one who makes things grow. Paul is a model of name-bearing done well: he knows the authority he has, but no pretensions to be more than the empowered servant he is.

To finish, pray for the Lord’s redemption of situations where his name has been misused, to the cost of many. Pray for leaders you know, that they will know the humility and confidence that Paul the apostle had. And pray for courage for yourself, to bear the name of the Lord well.