

Lesson 2: The Lord's Name

The Story of Balaam's Failed Curses (Numbers 22)

When Israel was wandering the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land, they had to pass through the lands of other nations. Most of these nations weren't very friendly. Some of them even went to war. But God was on the side of Israel, and they would win every time. Because of this, when they approached the kingdom of Moab (MOW-ab), the king there named Balak (buh-LOCK) decided to try something different. He called up a well-known wizard named Balaam (BAY-lum) and asked him to come and cast a curse on Israel.

The king sent some important officials along with gifts and payment for Balaam's wizardry, and asked him to come and curse Israel. The funny thing is, Balaam told the officials that there was nothing he could do if God didn't want him to cast a curse. He could try, but it wasn't up to him. The king didn't care; he just wanted Balaam to try it. So Balaam came with King Balak in order to cast this curse on Israel.

The first time, they went up on a high mountain so that Balaam could see part of the camp of the Israelites. They sacrificed oxen and rams, and then Balaam told King Balak that he had to wait for what the Lord would say so that he could cast the curse. After waiting a bit, Balaam finally opened his mouth and started speaking. The words he said, though, were not a curse, but a blessing! Just like he had said, he couldn't call upon the Lord to curse Israel if God wasn't going to do it. King Balak was furious, but he wanted to try again. So they went to a different mountaintop.

Again, King Balak made a sacrifice of oxen and rams, and Balaam told King Balak the same thing: he needed to wait for what the Lord would say so he could cast the curse. After waiting, he started to speak again. And wouldn't you know it, he spoke another blessing over Israel! King Balak was angry again, but Balaam explained that he couldn't call upon the Lord to curse Israel if God wasn't going to do it.

You would think King Balak would get the message by now, but he decided to try one more time. They went to a third mountain, and a third set of sacrifices happened, and Balaam did what he always did: he waited for God to give him the words.

Of course, when he started speaking, it was nothing but blessings all the way down. Not a curse to be found. King Balak was so mad he was steaming! But Balaam reminded him again that there was no way that he could curse Israel if God decided that wasn't going to happen. It was never in Balaam's power to use God's name to do something that God did not agree with, so if anything, Balak should be mad with himself for thinking it was possible.

Finally, King Balak got the message and sent Balaam home. He was so mad that he didn't even pay Balaam for his trouble! But he probably should have listened to Balaam to begin with. There would be no curses after all.

What It Means to Take the Lord's Name in Vain

This story about Balaam failing spectacularly to curse the Israelites was a humorous way of showing how God's name shouldn't be misused. Balaam was not able to curse Israel, because he would have needed to use God's name to do it. That is what "taking the Lord's name in vain" means—to misuse God's name.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand that is to imagine those situations where we use God's name without ever thinking about God. It shows up in phrases like "I swear to God!" and "Oh my God!" or the emphatic "Jesus Christ!" at something unexpected or bad. When we take God's name in vain in these situations, we are using God's name—the way we ought to address God alone—as if it was just another word. Instead of being aware of it and using God's name to love and care for others, we end up using it for its shock value.

This would be like using someone else's name constantly for emphasis in your casual conversations, but never once actually referring to that person. Imagine a world where your name was never used to talk to you, but instead used to make a point. It makes God less important if we can casually throw around God's name like it doesn't mean anything.

We should be aware, however, that using God's name in a casual way to add emphasis to things isn't the worst way that we can misuse God's name. In fact, too many Christians get too focused on this way of misusing God's name that they entirely forget the far worse ways that God's name is misused all the time!

The much more common way that people misuse God's name is when they *do* mean to use it, but use it for purposes that go against God. This is a much worse way to break the commandment because rather than just ignoring that God's name is important, it twists the importance of God's name to support things God would never support. God's name can be misused to cover up lies—like when someone swears to God they are telling the truth, but only swearing like that because they know it carries weight. God's name can be misused to hurt people—like when people use God's name to claim the authority to abuse or oppress people.

People misuse God's name so that they can get what they want far more often than misusing the name by casually ignoring it. Think of televangelists using God's name to support their ministry, but their "ministry" is mostly them taking money from desperate people who believe their claims that God will reward them with money and stuff if they donate to the televangelist's church! You could also think of businesses that talk a lot about God, but don't

treat their workers well, don't uplift their communities, or generally don't act any different than any other business. They only use God's name because they know it will get them more customers.

Martin Luther put it this way: "God's name must not be appealed to falsely, or taken upon the lips, while the heart knows well enough, or should know, differently." Plenty of people will wear God's name like a coat, with the intent to show off to their neighbors just how godly they are, but their commitment to God is only as deep as the coat that can be taken off at any point. Rather than being changed to do God's will, they misuse God's name to justify whatever it is they wanted to do already.

How does this affect the real world?

When we misuse God's name, we may wonder why it's so important. What could possibly go wrong by misusing God's name, if it's only words? Words, however, have power. The things we say can change the world around us and the way we understand the world around us. God's commandment not to misuse God's name is important because of the kind of effect misusing the name has on the world.

Even if misusing God's name is limited to those casual references where we hardly realize we're using God's name, it has an effect. In that case, the way we casually refer to God without thinking reinforces a way of thinking little of God's importance. If we can say God's name and never even think about God, how important is God to us really? And if God isn't important to us, then how are we going to recognize and live out God's call for our lives? Being aware of the words we use will also make us more aware of God's presence and God's call to love others and build up the kingdom.

If we misuse God's name on purpose, we face a whole different range of consequences. People consider God's name to be important, so when we manipulate others by using God's name for selfish, harmful, or generally wrong ends, we aren't just dishonoring God. We're also harming others. By misusing God's name in this way, we turn people into objects that can be manipulated, used, and just as easily thrown away.

The cynical way of using God's name to justify our bad behavior also shows others who we think God is, and that might be the only view they get of God! It will make it that much harder for others who do follow the commandment to build up the kingdom of God if people's only understanding of God is the one who supports cruelty, selfishness, hypocrisy, and lies.

For these reasons it's right that we should follow the commandment to honor God's name and not take it in vain. By using God's name rightly, we increase our own faith by being conscious of the times we use God's name. It deepens our trust when we turn to God in

thanksgiving or in hope and use God's name to ask for guidance or celebrate blessings. By using God's name rightly, we further God's kingdom by showing others who God is and pointing them toward the love, hope, forgiveness, and freedom we have in Christ. So we should always follow the commandment and honor God's name.