

The Third Commandment

“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 (Exodus 20:7).”

I. What’s In a Name?

As we examine this third commandment I would like to start off with, what I think may be, the saddest story in the Bible.

Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh, and passed through Mizpah of Gilead; and from Mizpah of Gilead he advanced toward the people of Ammon. And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, “If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, “then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.”

So Jephthah advanced toward the people of Ammon to fight against them, and the LORD delivered them into his hands. And he defeated them from Aroer as far as Minnith—twenty cities—and to Abel Keramim, with a very great slaughter. Thus the people of Ammon were subdued before the children of Israel.

When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she was his only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low! You are among those who trouble me! For I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot go back on it.” So she said to him, “My father, if you have given your word to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, because the LORD has avenged you of your enemies, the people of Ammon.” Then she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me: let me alone for two months, that I may go and wander on the mountains and bewail my virginity, my friends and I.” So he said, “Go.” And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her friends, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. And it was so at the end of two months that she returned to her

father, and he carried out his vow with her which he had vowed. She knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite” (Judge 11:29-40).

I’ve recorded this story simply to express how seriously God takes a vow or an oath or anything else that involves His name. The name of God is more than just a name. Concerning the name of God, Charles Hodge states,

“It often means a personal or individual designation, i.e., Jehovah. Frequently the “name of God” is equivalent to God himself. To call on the name of the Lord, and to call on God, are synonymous forms of expression. The name of God, therefore, includes everything by which He makes Himself known.”¹

God is Not a Rose

We are not merely talking about a ‘handle’. Some might say, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” This might be true when it comes to roses. But a rose is a physical entity that can be known by its physical substance. God, on the other hand, is spirit. We learned in the previous chapter that God is not to be worshipped, or thought of, in that physical sense.

How God Reveals His Name

Firstly, God reveals Himself by His name. He states, **“Tell them that ‘I AM’ has sent you”** God’s names tell us about Him. He refers to Himself as ‘El’ or ‘Elohim’ which may be a general term expressing His majesty and authority. ‘Adonai’ expresses His lordship, ‘Jehovah’ would be a personal name, ‘Abba’ would be daddy, etc. As we grow as Christians the names of God should become more meaningful to us since they tell us of His attributes.

Secondly, the name of Gods is “to be taken generally and comprehensively for anything whereby God makes himself known.”² For example, along with His names, He gives titles, such as the God of Abraham or the King of kings. He also gives His attributes, such as the Lord is Holy. God also makes His name known through the sacraments, through the Scriptures and through His creation.

Reverence and Appreciation

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprint 1989), p. 306.

² Thomas Vincent, *A Family Instructional Guide*, (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation) 1997.

We are to acknowledge this, and reverently appreciate and use these things, with an eye toward Him who has created, maintains and reveals these things to us. In short, to use God's name in vain means to either disavow or disrespect His rightful ownership of all things.

II. This Commandment Does Not Forbid

It has been suggested that this commandment forbids all oaths. At first glance this appears to be the case when we consider the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He says we should not swear *at all*. Of course Jesus went on to qualify His statement. Checking Scripture with Scripture we realize that Jesus was speaking of spurious oaths that the Pharisees were in the habit of making (see Matthew 23).

There are many occasions where prominent biblical individuals swore and made vows: Paul swore by God. **“For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you” (Romans 1:9)**. God swore by an oath. In Hebrews 6:13–18 the author of Hebrews declares that God, in order **“to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath”; and that, ‘because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself.’**

It is evident, therefore, that the words of our Savior (Matthew 5:34), **“Swear not at all,”** cannot be intended to forbid swearing upon proper occasions in the name of the true God, but must be designed to forbid the calling upon his name in ordinary conversation and on trifling occasions. Jesus made an oath Himself.

“And the high priest arose and said to Him, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” Jesus said to him, “It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:62-64).

Some common vows before God we see today are weddings, witnesses in court, commitments as elders, deacons, church members, etc. These are all acceptable before God and should be considered very binding.

A Deeper Level

As truthful as we all ought to be, we must realize that a vow or an oath brings us to a deeper level of commitment. I was watching Star Trek TNG in an

episode where Riker (the second ranking officer on the Enterprise) was involved in an exchange program with the Klingons (very tough aliens). Riker was now serving as second in command on the Klingon vessel. Naturally the Klingons questioned his honor. Riker said, something to the effect, "I will serve you even if it costs me my life." The Klingon officer said, "Will you make an oath to that?" To which Riker responded, "I just did." In other words, his word was his oath. That sounds very noble. And our word should be our oath. Yet we all realize that the depth of an oath extends beyond our normal every day words.

Marriage Versus Engagement

For example, saying yes, when asked to be married does not carry with it the same level of commitment as saying yes in the wedding. Breaking off engagements is commonplace and acceptable based upon any number of circumstances. Breaking off a marriage is only acceptable based upon death, desertion or adultery. I may tell my wife that I'll be home by 5:00 PM. But if someone comes into my office who has just lost a loved one, or is in dire straits, I may not live up to that commitment. This is something my wife understands and accepts.

III. This Commandment Forbids

So what does this commandment forbid? Using God's name in vain or misusing the name of God. To misuse the name of God, or to use His name in vain, literally means to attach emptiness to it. Again, Hodge states,

"All irreverence towards God...careless, unnecessary reference to Him or his attributes; all indecorous (lacking good taste or propriety) conduct in worship;...every indication of the want of that fear, reverence, and awe due to a Being infinite in all his perfections, on whom we are absolutely dependent, and to whom we are accountable for our character and conduct."³

In books or movies we might see a group of warriors who have great respect for a departed king. When his name is mentioned they might all bow their heads in reverence. His very name demands respect. To use it lightly, casually, or in a manner not befitting the august nature of it is just unacceptable.

Profanity

Perhaps the most common understanding we have of using God's name in vain is profanity. That is, the association of the name of God with anger, frustration or even excitement. It means to use God's name flippantly or falsely.

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol III*, (Eerdmans, reprint 1989), p. 306.

We must be careful when the name of God is used as an interjection or exclamation. It may very well be the plan of the enemy to make the name of God mundane; to place it alongside, not only silly words, but also filthy words.

As a Christian, the very name of Jesus should bring us to our knees. Paul writes,

“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth” (Philippians 2:9,10).

Making His Name Common

We ought to exalt the name of God. We should be careful to avoid associating God’s name with that which is common or mundane. Christians will often develop their own sub-cultural vernacular. We tend to talk about God as if He were our imaginary friend or next door neighbor. We might seize Christian jargon to appear spiritual.

I had a friend who would use terms like ‘praise God’ or ‘glory’ or ‘hallelujah’ to an extent that the words lost all meaning. We would be playing golf and if he made a good shot he would shout ‘glory to God’. This is very subjective of course, but I found his language void of the depth and reverence that God, the things of God, and the name of God, deserves.

I am not suggesting that there are not appropriate times to verbally give glory to God, praise His name or seek to bring God’s blessings to others. But we ought to rethink how suitable or indecorous our language is when His name starts rolling off our lips without much thought behind it.

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. ²Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter *any* thing before God: for God *is* in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few” (Ecclesiastes 5:1 KJV).

One-upping Others

To use one’s faith, knowledge of God and the Scriptures to lord over others is a violation of this commandment. It is a common temptation to one-up others and make them feel less significant by using the name and ways of God. To use your knowledge of the Scriptures to win an argument rather than to bless, or convict, a brother is a very common example of the violation of the third commandment.

I made a commitment long ago to be careful to see when a conversation had disintegrated to the place where my words were no longer a blessing. There are few things that grieve me more than when I have found that I used whatever gifts God has given me for this empty pursuit. Five or six years ago I found myself in this type of conversation and it grieves me to this day.

Guilt Tripping

Using the name of God for the expressed purpose of making others feel guilty is a violation of this commandment. This is a very low form of manipulation. To guilt somebody into doing what you desire, and using the Scriptures as your personal and self-centered instrument to accomplish this, is a sin. It might be a husband or a father misusing his authority. It might be a wife disrespecting her husband because of some personal call she has decided God has on her life.

I knew an attractive young woman who was very involved in a church where people believed they were still receiving direct, unmediated revelation from God. A young man had written her a ten page letter of revelation he had, supposedly, received straight from the Lord. In her effort to convince me of the legitimacy of these types of revelations, she showed me the letter which was almost all biblical. In fact, it seemed he just copied some Psalms. A few months later the man told the young lady that God had told him they ought to go to Hawaii together. How convenient!

This is a very insidious and subtle violation of this commandment. We should all continually pray that God will show the hurtful ways in us when it comes to using His name in vain.

Dishonest Gain

Perhaps the most popular violation of this commandment is to be found with televangelism. Robert Tilton, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland and Benny Hinn, to name a few, are the high profile violators of the third commandment. What we see here is the using of the name of God to make money. With these particular evangelists we see people who have abandoned the unadulterated word of God, breeding upon the weak and the sick in order to feather their own nests.

This commandment states, “**for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.**” I fear that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who use the gospel for personal gain. I don’t mean to be unduly harsh, but read the words of Peter regarding these people.

“They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls.

They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever" (2 Pet. 2:13-17).

Hallowed Be Thy Name

We must take great care with the name of God. As we grow and mature in Christ, His name should become more and more precious to us—more and more holy to us—more and more sacred. He is God and there is no other. We are not to think of God in the form of images made by hand but His name is to occupy a hallowed place in our hearts and on our lips.

The Church

Allow me to seek to place my finger upon our spiritual nerves when it comes to the primary organism God has chosen to reveal His name, the church. I have to believe that one of, if not the greatest, violation of this commandment occurs within the hearts of God's own people as they wander into churches throughout the land. In the holy congregation we comfortably walk in tardy. We allow ourselves to be distracted by what happened this morning or what might take place this afternoon. We wonder if the service will run smoothly and if we will like the songs that are chosen. Will the pastor be entertaining and how will I be enriched by the whole event?

The Upper Room

I wonder, if we were invited into the upper room, the day before the cross, would we have the same fickle and flippant attitude? At what point would we begin to weep? At what point would we begin to realize that it's not all about 'me'? At what point would we begin to realize that no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot dispense with our selfishness? Would our hands tremble as we held the cup realizing our need for it, yet also our fear and unworthiness of it?

For what vain and empty reason have we entered into His holy sanctuary today? Has this law revealed to me my sin? On the next day when I gaze upon the cross will I be more resolute about my need for it? Will I plunge myself headlong into the sufficient work of Jesus Christ the righteous, who never had a profane, idle, or wandering thought concerning the name of His Father? May

God grant us the power to properly handle His holy name. And in our failure, may Christ continue to hold us up by the power of His atoning sacrifice. Amen.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Define what is meant by the name of God.
2. How does God reveal His name?
3. What should our response be to His name?
4. Are all oaths sinful? How do you know?
5. What are some things the third commandment forbids?
6. Is it only wrong to use God's name in profanity, or cussing?
7. What are some ways we see God's name being made common?
8. Discuss one-upmanship, guilt-trips and dishonest gain.
9. How can this commandment be violated on Sunday mornings?
10. How do we respond to our failure in keeping this commandment?