



The Third Commandment

PROTECTS RESPECT FOR GOD'S NAME

"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

MAIN IDEA: The attitude we are to have toward God at all times is that of reverence and honor.

OUTLINE:

- A. A Directive Expressed (v.7a)
- B. An Affirmative Implied (v.7b)

DISCUSSION:

1. Why would a man deliberately take the Lord's name in vain in the first place?
2. If someone takes the Lord's name in vain and is a believer, will he be punished? Where is the balance between forgiveness and accepting the consequences of one's actions?

LESSON:

It is said that the devil has two false glasses which he sets before men's eyes: *the first is a little glass, in which sin appears so small that it can hardly be seen*. He sets this one before men's eyes when they are about to commit sin; the second is *a great magnifying glass, wherein sin appears so big that it cannot be forgiven*. This is the one the devil sets before men's eyes after they have sinned.⁷

As we study this subject of the Law and the Savior, be aware of how the devil will subtly use these two false glasses to discourage and deceive you; but remember, God has a magnifying glass, too! The prophet Isaiah declared, "he will magnify the law, and make it honourable" (Is.42:21 KJV). The Law is God's magnifying glass, through which we look to see our great need of the Savior! An old Baptist evangelist was right when he said, "The first message of the cross is the law of God."⁸ The Gospel announces that a Savior has assumed the sinner's place (1 Pet.3:18) and rendered for him the obedience and satisfaction which the Law required (Rom.8:3). This is why the Apostle Paul says, "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom.10:4). Let us come now to the third commandment in our study of the Law.

⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p.88

⁸ Earnest Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel*, p.8

Someone has written, "Thinking is but speaking to oneself."⁹ If this is true, then God's commandments teach us how important it is to think accurately and adequately about Him. How we think affects who we are (*Prov.23:7a*). Jesus said, "[man's] mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (*Luke 6:45*). This is why it is said that the primary target in spiritual battle is a battle for the mind—because how we think dictates how we speak and how we live. Therefore, if we are to speak and live in a way that pleases God, we cannot possess shallow, vain, or small thoughts about God! The third commandment speaks to why this is so important.

What does the third commandment teach? If you look at Exodus 20:7 carefully, you will find two things: a directive expressed and an affirmative implied.

A. The directive expressed: *"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain..."*

In other words, we are forbidden to cast any reflections and dishonor on God's name. The word "**take**" here is very important. It refers to "*lifting up*" something. Here we are told that we are not to take, use, or "lift up" the Lord's name in vain. How do we lift up God's name?

- We lift up God's name when we speak His name—whenever His name is on our lips, we are lifting up His name before other people and giving a certain impression about the God of whom we speak.
- We lift up God's name when we profess to trust in Christ—in our profession of faith, we are actually identifying with His name and His fame (*Rom.2:23-24*).
- We lift up God's name when we are baptized and come to the Lord's Table—these actions say to the church and to the world that we are identifying with Christ by bearing His name as His follower and servant (*1 Cor.10:16ff*).
- We lift up His name when we come to church—by our attendance, we are saying to others that we are identifying ourselves with "the called-out ones," who belong to God (*Heb.10:24ff*).
- We lift up God's name when we take an oath—in marriage and in court; by doing so, we are calling upon God's name to bear witness of a commitment or a pledge that we are making in His sight and in the eyes of others (*Matt.5:33ff*).
- We lift up God's name when we worship and pray—we often begin our prayer by addressing God by His name, "Dear Lord" or "Our Father," and we often end our prayer by saying, "In Jesus' name." This is why the first petition in the Lord's Prayer is, "*Hallowed be Your name*" (*Matt.6:9*). We honor God's name because we are saying, "Lord, we set Your name apart from all other names and uses because of who You are!" A correct interpretation of worship is the ascribing of worth to God by the "lifting up" of praise due to His name (*Ps.115:1; Ps.29:1-2*).
- We lift up God's name when the Word of God is being preached—preaching is the "lifting up" of God's name in the proclamation of His Word, which is what we read in Psalm 138:2, "*For You have magnified Your word according to all Your name.*"

⁹ As quoted by H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, editors, *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol.1, p.146

The word “**take**” helps us understand the *use* of God’s name, but the word “**vain**” speaks of its *misuse* or *abuse*. The third commandment contains what theologians call a *meiosis*, where less is said, and more is intended.

First, what is meant by “the name of the LORD”? The “*name of the LORD*” does not just refer to the actual words, “God” or “Lord,” but rather, God’s name in the mind of ancient Hebrews referred to His revealed character and essence. His name speaks of His self-revelation in all its forms. For instance:

- His *house* is connected to His name. (2 Sam.7:13; Is.56:6-7)
- His *works* are connected to His name. (Ps.8:1; Ezek.36:21-23)
- His *ordinances* are connected to His name. (Zech.3:7)
- His *Word* is connected to His name. (Ps.138:2)
- His *people* are connected to His name. (2 Chr.7:14)

Therefore, when the Word of God says in Psalm 9:10a that “*those who know Your name will put their trust in You,*” it speaks of those who both witness God’s attributes in nature, and who have come to personally apprehend the character which His name denotes (Ex.6:3-7; 1 Kin.8:43; Ps.91:14; Is.52:6; Jer.16:21). This means that only a true Christian can fulfill this commandment.

God is so serious about His name that He swears by it (Jer.44:26), which means He speaks of His name as the One who has the power to fulfill with His hand what He has said with His mouth. God cares about His name because His name speaks of all that He is and does. Today, men can be sued in a court of law for hurting another man’s reputation or name. Or legal action can be taken if a company’s name is used in a way that is not authorized by the owners. If this is true in the courts of men, then we can be certain that it is true in the courts of God! God will keep His word about His reputation, and His holy name—“*for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.*”

Second, what is meant by “vain”? If God’s name speaks of His revealed character and essence, then what does it mean to “take” or to “lift up” God’s name “*in vain*”?

The word “**vain**” here is a Hebrew noun (*Shav’*), which appears 53 times in the Old Testament. It means more than just *emptiness*; it also means *commonness*—or, to put it another way, it means ordinary or of no real worth or use. Taking God’s name in vain does not only mean using God’s name in connection with cursing or profanity; it also refers to using the Lord’s name lightly or without thinking—flippantly, carelessly, or irreverently. This commandment plainly states that we are not to use the Lord’s name as something common, worthless, or ordinary.

I grew up in an atmosphere where kids calling one another names was no big deal. It was common or ordinary. We called it “rankin” on someone. The moment “rankin” included the name of “yo momma,” the entire childish game changed from something playful to something serious. One moment we were laughing at each other and having fun, but the next moment we were ready to throw down (fight)! Why? Because we had a respect for our mother that was different from anything else. The same must be true when we use God’s name. We are never to use God’s name in a thoughtless, careless, or ordinary way.

The word “**vain**” does not merely mean *emptiness* and *commonness*, but it also means *falseness*. It is said that Philip of Macedon would swear and unswear, whenever it stood best with his interests. In life, we call this a politician. In court, it is called perjury. Our Lord Jesus said we are not to use God’s name to get

others to believe us about anything trite or superficial (*Cf. Matt.5:33-37; Ps.15*). In other words, making vows in God's name is prohibited because of our misuse of it and the weight of the reputation of Him upon whom it rests (*James 5:12*).

How do we take God's name in vain?

Thomas Watson lays out nine ways we take God's name in vain.¹⁰

1. When we speak lightly or irreverently of His name (*Deut.28:58*)
2. When we profess God's name, but do not live it (*Titus 1:16*)
3. When we use God's name in idle discourse (*Lev.10:2*)
4. When we worship with our lips, but not with our hearts (*Prov.23:26*)
5. When we pray to Him, but do not believe Him (*Rom.10:14*)
6. When we, in any way, profane or abuse His Word (*2 Pet.3:4*)
7. When we swear by God's name (*Matt.5:34*)
8. When we use our tongues in any way to the dishonor of God's name (*James 3:8-10; 4:11*)
9. When we murmur at His providences (*Gen.18:25; Num.14:27*)

In addition to these obvious ways of taking the Lord's name in vain, there are also some very subtle and common ways that Christians take God's name in vain without realizing it. You may not dare use the name "God" flippantly, but we commit the same infraction when we say things like:

- "Good grief" (a careless and irreverent reference to Christ's suffering in Gethsemane and on Calvary)
- "My goodness" (instead of "My God")
- "Gosh" (instead of God)
- "Darn" (instead of damn)
- "Gee" (instead of Jesus)

You may not go all the way and say certain words, but using these "cloaked terms" has the effect of deceiving our consciences into thinking that we are not doing wrong because we didn't go all the way in our speech or actions. In defense of ourselves, we may say, "I didn't mean anything by it!" Nevertheless, in the very confession we make, we condemn ourselves, and in doing so, we show that we are not being thoughtful in the way we think or speak of God.

We violate this command when we irreverently say, "Oh my God," "Lord Almighty," "Good God," "Honest to God," etcetera. This commandment tells us that God's name, or the self-revelation of His name, should produce a sober, serious, respectful, and worshipful attitude. In other words, there is to be an inner consciousness of His majestic nature that controls what we say (our lips), and how we live (our priorities and passions). We are not to use God's name in the same way that we use ordinary things of no value!

¹⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, pp.84-92

Bottom line: The aim of this commandment is to impress reverence upon our hearts as we approach God and live for Him. Its design is to put us in the proper frame of mind in dealing with the things of God. Read how Solomon put it in Ecclesiastes 5:1-2,

- Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. ² Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few.

What is the sacrifice of fools? It is what Solomon offered at one time—the kind of worship that never shows itself in our daily lives. A fool gives God the sacrifice of singing, praying, giving, sharing, and studying, and then goes out and lives as he pleases. The fool’s worship never changes him.

B. The affirmative implied: “...for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.”

This means we are to be careful to reverence and honor God’s name because He takes His name seriously. To not “leave him unpunished” means to hold him guiltless.

In this life, men may seem to do many things for which they go unpunished (*Eccl.8:11*), but God says that the thoughtless, empty, distorted use of His name will not go without due penalty. In other words, what God says in contrast to us is that “You may not mean what you say, but I mean what I say. You may not have taken Me and My name seriously, but I do. I will take the matter in My own hand.”

Just as there are a thousand ways that death can come upon a man to usher him into the presence of God, God has a million ways to punish one for taking His name in vain.

- German history tells of a youth who was given to swearing and inventing ways of taking the Lord’s name in vain. The Lord sent a cancer into his mouth, which ate out his tongue, and from which he died.
- Olympias, an Arian bishop, reproached and blasphemed the Trinity; after which he was suddenly struck with three flashes of lightning, which burned him to death.
- Felix, an officer of Julia, seeing the holy vessels which were used in the Lord’s Supper, said, in scorn of Christ, “See what precious vessels the Son of Mary is served with.” Soon after, he was taken with vomiting of blood from his blasphemous mouth, of which he died.¹¹

“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb.10:31). The same God who spoke the world into existence says what He means and means what He says. Let us take a different course and honor the name of the One who loved us by sending His own Son to die on our behalf.

Thomas Watson tells the story of a woman who told her husband that of her three sons, only one of them was truly his. As the father was dying, he desired that the executors of his estate find out which one was the true son and bequeath all of his estate to him. Once the father was dead, the administrators set up the dead father’s corpse against a tree and gave to each of the three sons a bow and arrows. The challenge given was whoever could shoot nearest to the father’s heart should have the whole estate.

¹¹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*

Two sons shot as near as they could to his heart, but the third son could not do it. He refused to shoot, whereupon the executors of the estate judged him to be the true son and gave him all the estate.¹²

Such is true of the genuine child of God. They fear to hurt their heavenly Father's name because they truly love Him and desire to honor His name. Will you honor His name?

APPLICATION:

THE COMMANDMENTS and CHRIST—How did Christ fulfill the third commandment?

THE COMMANDMENTS and THE CHRISTIAN—How do we violate the third commandment today, and what will help us fulfill it?

What is your takeaway from this lesson?

¹² Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, pp.89-90

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