

# The Commands of Christ

## The Third Commandment-A

*Exodus 20:7*  
Part Seven

*With Study Questions*

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*3/4/2018*

# The Third Commandment-A

*Exodus 20:7*

**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).**

## **Preface**

We're in the process of seeking to understand and obey what Jesus taught regarding loving God and loving others. The Greatest Commandment is a summary of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments summarize how we are to love God, the next six how we are to love one another.

Loving God certainly, and primarily, includes having **"no other gods before"** (Exodus 20:3) Him. This is a supremely gracious command for who is qualified to be God but God alone? Who has the wisdom, power, justice, love and grace for that particular office? It's like a loving father remind his children that he is their father.

Loving God also includes being careful not to exchange the true God, revealed in Scripture, with our tendencies to form **"images"** or **"likenesses"** (Exodus 20:4) of God either through art or even in our minds. Those endeavors can do nothing but detract from the full and accurate perception of God through the appropriate means He has determined, i.e. Scriptures, word and sacrament.

This tendency to adjust God according to our perceived needs, functionally makes God something other than He is, causing Him to be **"jealous"** (*qanna*) since God desires to have an exclusive relationship with His children, which of course, is of great advantage to us. God's jealousy should not be construed as envy or insecurity on his part, but rather the recognition that we are betrothed to Him and He loves us and it grieves Him when we follow and give our primary affections to someone or something that does not have that true and loving concern for our souls.

We now approach the Third Commandment.

Assuming we are seeking to worship the one true God in truth; and

assuming we understand, at least at some level, that we shouldn't seek to carve God into something we think is best at the expense of His character, the Third Commandment addresses how we handle the staggering responsibility of **"the name of the Lord"**.

## **The Name of the Lord**

First, we need to be clear on what the **"name of the Lord"** even means. I ran into an old friend at The Home Depot and he told me of his new church where they were calling on the name of the Lord. I asked him what he meant. They were literally and verbally calling on the name of the Lord. If I were to attend that church (assuming I understood him correctly), I would hear the congregation all somehow calling out God's name. I don't think that's what it means. 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.<sup>1</sup>**

We are not merely talking about a 'handle'. We might think of the famous line from *Romeo and Juliet* where Juliet utters, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet." This might be true when it comes to roses, or even people as in the play. But these are physical entities that can be known by their physical substance.

God, on the other hand, is Spirit. We learned previously that God is not to be worshipped, or thought of, in that physical sense. Though God is revealed everywhere we look, including our own introspections (Romans 1:19, 20; Psalm 19), in a very special way God reveals Himself through the use of words and those words include His Name.

God's names tell us about Him. For example, 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

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

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.

But the Name of the Lord applies to more than the names God uses for Himself. The name of God is **“to be taken generally and comprehensively for anything whereby God makes himself known.”**<sup>2</sup> 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. We are to acknowledge this, and reverently appreciate and use these names with an eye toward Him who has created, maintains and reveals these things to us.

Even further, **“the name of the Lord”** goes beyond the names or titles God uses to describe Himself. **“The name of the Lord”** refers to God Himself. Conversely, to use God’s name in vain means to either disavow or disrespect Him and His rightful ownership of all things.

## **Does Not Forbid**

Before we talk about what this command forbids, it might do us well to speak of what it doesn’t forbid. It has been suggested that this commandment forbids all oaths (since oaths are generally made in the name of God). 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 23:18-22).

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

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

declares that God, desiring...

**...to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath (Hebrews 6:17).**

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 made in weddings, by witnesses in court, commitments as elders, deacons, church members, etc. These are all acceptable before God and should be considered very binding.

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 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.

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. Even our daily commitments may meet fairly minor mitigating circumstances which would justify not doing what we said we would do. I may tell my wife that I'll be home by 5:00 PM. But if on my way home I stop and help someone with a flat tire, I may not live up to that commitment. This is something my wife understands and accepts.

### **This Commandment Forbids**

So, what does this commandment forbid? To misuse the name of God, or to use His name in "**vain**" *lassaw*, 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.**<sup>3</sup>

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. We must be careful when the name of God is used as

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

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).**

### **Casual/Disrespectful References**

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 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. <sup>2</sup>Be 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, 2 KJV).**

The Westminster Larger Catechism teaches that this commandment forbids "**vain janglings**". This essentially means engaging in empty or

inaccurate babbling about God and the things of God. The Apostle Paul wrote of this in his first epistle to Timothy.

**The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions (1 Timothy 1:5-7).**

This particular violation of the commandment, it would be my observation, has hit an epidemic level in western evangelicalism. And the range of perpetrators is a vast. From the neo-atheist giving their amazingly errant views of what the Bible teaches to the televangelist, confident assertions which lack understanding have run amuck.

In our following message, we will dig deeper into this and discuss other infractions of this commandment. I will also share with what I believe to be one of my most personal struggles in keeping this commandment.

But I would like to complete this portion of the sermon with, perhaps, the greatest use of God's name that we can enjoy. And that is the glorious and gracious phrase we see commonly displayed upon the pages of Scripture which states that **"whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Romans 10:13).**

To call upon the name of the Lord is to trust in Christ as Savior, to confess Him as Lord and ever repose in Him as the eternal preserver and comforter of our souls. This is where all our studies of God's law most graciously lead us. It leads us to recognize our need. Do we recognize our need? Can we see what we lack? It has been written that,

**...through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Romans 3:20-22a).**

Our study of loving God and seeking to keep His law is reduced to

the ministry of death (2 Corinthians 3:7) apart from faith in the only true keeper of the law, Jesus Christ. When we call upon His name, the victory in its entirety becomes ours.

## Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What do the Ten Commandments essential teach (page 2)?
2. Define what is meant by the name of God (pages 3, 4).
3. How does God reveal His name (pages 3, 4)?
4. What should our response be to His name (pages 3, 4)?
5. Are all oaths sinful? How do you know (pages 4, 5)?
6. What are some things the third commandment forbids (pages 6-9)?
7. Is profanity or cussing the only violation of this commandment? Explain.
8. What are some ways we see God's name being made common (pages 7, 8)?
9. What does it mean to call upon the name of the Lord? Have you done this (page 8)?