

The Christian Life (8): The Third Commandment

Whereas the first commandment addresses the object of our worship, the second commandment the matter of our worship, the third commandment deals with the manner of our worship.

Q. What is the difference between the worship of God required in this third commandment, and that which is required in the first and second commandments? A. The first commandment has a respect unto the object of God's worship; the second commandment has a respect unto the means of worship; but this third commandment has a respect unto the manner of worship, requiring that it be performed with humility and holy fear, with sincerity, fervency, and all kind of holy affections.¹

I. The Third Commandment

Q. What is required in the third commandment? A. That we must not profane or abuse the name of God by cursing, by perjury, or by unnecessary oaths. Nor are we to participate in such horrible sins by keeping quiet and thus giving silent consent. In a word, we must not use the holy name of God except with fear and reverence so that He may be rightly confessed and addressed by us and be glorified in all our words and works.²

1. *Duties required.* "By the Name of the Lord our God is signified God Himself as He is made known to us, including everything through which He has been pleased to reveal Himself: His Word, His titles, His attributes, His ordinances, His works. The Name of God stands for His very nature and being" (Pink).³ Thus, various names, titles, and attributes are ascribed to God "that some knowledge of His nature and perfections may be conveyed to us" (Fisher).⁴ For example, by the name of LORD (Jehovah), He conveys the knowledge of His absolute, eternal, and immutable essence, and by the name God (Elohim), He conveys the knowledge of His excellency, sovereignty, and power. While His names "set forth what He is in Himself, His titles set forth what He is to others."⁵ Such titles would include Creator, Most High, Deliverer, and King of kings. "Some of these titles describe Him as the God of nature and others the God of grace" (Fisher).⁶ The same is true of His attributes. "By attributes are meant the perfections and excellencies which are ascribed to Him as the essential properties of His nature. (Fisher)."⁷ God's attributes (love, justice, patience, wisdom, etc.), are ways whereby God reveals Himself.

Thus, by "name" is meant all that God has revealed Himself to be. His names, titles, and attributes are an accurate and sufficient revelation of God's essence. And so, Scripture equates God's name with God Himself, as the first is the revelation of the second. "Accordingly, the names by which we call and address God are not arbitrary: they were not conceived by us at our own pleasure. It is God Himself who deliberately and freely reveals Himself, who gives us the right to name Him on the basis of His self-revelation, and who in His word has made His own names known to us on that same basis"

¹ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 133

² The Heidelberg Catechism, Q.99

³ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 17

⁴ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 272

⁵ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 272

⁶ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 273

⁷ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 273

(Bavinck).⁸ These names are an accommodation on God's part towards mankind. "The names were assumed in condescension to our weakness, that we might be assisted in coming to a knowledge of His being and His character" (Thornwell).⁹ "Properly considered, God has no name. Yet because all our knowledge begins from a name, He assumes various names in Scripture to accommodate Himself to us" (Turretin).¹⁰

We receive names from our parents for identification, but God did not receive His Name from anyone. He has named Himself. He chose to give Himself names, not because He needed them, as we do to distinguish ourselves from others who are like us; but the Lord gave Himself names to make Himself known unto us, so that we would know His divine Essence by His Names.¹¹

Thus, more specifically, the Name of God refers to that by which He is called and made known to us. To "take His Name" means to employ or make use of the same, as the Object of our thoughts or the Subject of our speech. Not to take His Name "in vain" is the negative way of saying it must be held in the utmost awe and used holily in thought and word and deed.¹²

To take up the name of God as it is laid before us in His word is to meditate on it in our thoughts, speak of it in our words, and make an open profession of it in our deeds, adorning our lives with an answerable practice. This taking up of God's name is necessary to His honor; and without it we hide, bury, and deny the excellency and usefulness of His name.¹³

(1) We must sanctify God's name in our heart. "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1Pet.3:15). To "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" means "to view and consider Him as He is." "The LORD of hosts, Him you shall hallow; let Him be your fear and let Him be your dread" (Isa.8:13). "We are to make use of His name in thought, whether by simply conceiving it, and the several parts of it, or by settled meditation upon it. Thus we are to take up the name of God into our minds, thinking and meditating upon His names, titles, attributes, &. And thus that question, 'What is His name' (Prov.30:4), may be our continual study, our every day's lesson; and it will serve us to learn as long as we are in the world; and no wonder, for it is what the saints in heaven are learning, and will learn through eternity. This is our duty, and would be a most profitable study, being a great part of the life of faith, whereby the soul feeds on God Himself" (Boston).¹⁴

(2) We must sanctify God's name in our speech. We hallow God's name when we speak about God with honor and reverence. "We ought to be so disposed in mind and speech that we neither think nor say anything concerning God and His mysteries, without reverence and much soberness. Whatever our mind conceives of God, whatever our tongue utters, should savor of His excellence, match the

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:99

⁹ J.H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 1:143

¹⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:183-184

¹¹ G.H. Kersten, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 2:142

¹² A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 17

¹³ John Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 466-467

¹⁴ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:160-61

loftiness of His sacred name, and lastly, serve to glorify His greatness" (Calvin).¹⁵ "We hallow the name of God through honorific thought and speech about everything that signifies the name of God, through constant sincerity and truth everywhere in words and deeds for Him. For when man speaks he also does something as the image of God, and he ought to act and speak as professing his God" (Heidegger).¹⁶ According to Zacharias Ursinus, "the third commandment consists in the lawful and honorable use of the name of God, which includes, the propagation of the true doctrine respecting the essence, will and works of God, not, indeed that which belongs to the office of teaching publicly in the church, of which mention is made in the fourth commandment; but that by which every one in his own peculiar sphere is bound to instruct others privately, and which contributes to the true knowledge and worship of God, as it is said: 'Teach them to your children and your grandchildren' (Deut.4:9)."¹⁷ "To speak of God is the great end of speech that is given to man, made to be the mouth of the creation; and therefore our tongue is called our glory, by which we ought to contribute to the displaying of the glory of God, in His name, titles, &." (Boston).¹⁸

(3) We must sanctify God's name in our actions. "Therefore you shall keep My commandments and perform them: I am the LORD. You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel. I am the LORD who sanctifies you" (Lev.22:31-32). "When men's tongues and lives are contrary to one another, when, under a mask of profession, they lie and cheat, and are unclean, they make use of God's name to abuse Him, and take it in vain" (Watson).¹⁹ "For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you (i.e., because of their hypocrisy)" (Rom.2:24). "We will walk in the name of the LORD our God (i.e., we will walk worthy of that name and thus glorify Him)" (Mic.4:5). "Men profane the name of God in their outward walk by making profession of religion in hypocrisy, and backsliding from it (Heb.6:6); or, by committing such enormities and immoralities, as reflect dishonor upon it, and make the name of God to be evil spoken of (Rom.2:24)" (Fisher).²⁰

Thus, while we are to always sanctify the Lord in our heart, speech, and life, this is especially true in public worship. We must enter into His courts with fear and adoration. "Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth" (Ps.96:9). "The LORD is great in Zion, and He is high above all the peoples. Let them praise Your great and awesome name – He is holy" (Ps.99:2-3). "Reverence and fear are at the heart of Christian worship" (Hart).²¹ The third commandment regulates every aspect of worship. "The third commandment requires the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, Word, and works."²² By "ordinances" are meant "the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration of the Sacraments; prayer and praise; religious fasting and thanksgiving."²³ "While we should always reverently make use of those things whereby God makes Himself known, we must especially do so when we are called to the duties of His immediate worship" (Vincent).²⁴ "We make a holy and reverent use of the ordinances when we view God as

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22

¹⁶ Johann Heinrich Heidegger, *The Concise Marrow of Theology*, 97

¹⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 537-538

¹⁸ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:161

¹⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 85

²⁰ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 284

²¹ D.G. Hart, *With Reverence and Awe*, 119-120

²² Shorter Catechism, Q.54

²³ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 273

²⁴ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 133

present in them (Matt.28:20); and attend or perform them with a single eye to His glory (Ps.86:9)" (Fisher).²⁵ In short, we are to enter into the worship of God with a sense of the dignity and glory of God's holy and majestic name. "Reverence does not exclude joy. Joy should find natural outlets in worship. But the need for reverence and gravity dictates that any expression of emotion in worship should be tempered by moderation, self-control, and above all, respect for who God is and an awareness of our place before Him" (Hart).²⁶

2. *Sins forbidden.* "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" (Ex.20:7). The Hebrew word rendered "vain" means "empty" or falsely." It here refers to using God's name in an empty, meaningless, false, or flip-pant manner. By inference it "forbids all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God makes Himself known."²⁷ To this is added a stern warning: "for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

The incentive added to this commandment is extracted from the threat of harm. "I will not hold him guiltless." Man may consider it to be a very insignificant matter, but God deems it to be a very great matter. Even though man is not sensitive to this and does not believe that he has committed a great sin, God considers him guilty and worthy of being punished, and He will also certainly punish him. For it is an act whereby one greatly despises God as well as a clear manifestation that he does not love God – and thus a direct affront toward God.²⁸

It may be asked, what is the great evil of this sin, that it is so severely punished? It is a sin that is directly against God, His glorious greatness and infinite majesty. That name is dreadful which men profane. The angels adore it, the devils tremble at it; and should vile worms of the earth profane it at every turn? Sins of the second table strike directly against men, but this is one of those that go out immediately against the Majesty of Heaven.²⁹

(1) Swearing by God falsely or unnecessarily. "And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD" (Lev.19:12). "The third commandment has particular reference to the oath, wherein the perverse abuse of the Lord's name is in the highest degree detestable, that thereby we may be better frightened away altogether from all profaning of it" (Calvin).³⁰ While the third commandment doesn't forbid oaths, it regulates them. "An oath is calling God as witness to confirm the truth of our word" (Calvin).³¹ Lawful oaths are taken in entrance to certain professions, marriage, baptism, and judicial proceedings. These are lawful and binding, providing they are done with honesty and moderation. But they become violations of the third commandment if done hastily, falsely, or unnecessarily. It is the last of these that is most common today. People are quick to use such phrases as "I swear" or "as God is my witness." "Unnecessary oaths occur when in our daily conversation we drag God's name in for the purpose of emphasis. 'Heaven help me' and

²⁵ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 280

²⁶ D.G. Hart, *With Reverence and Awe*, 122

²⁷ Shorter Catechism, Q.55

²⁸ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:120

²⁹ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:181

³⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.22

'So help me God' are oath formulas designed to lend force to our words. But boosting the credibility of our words by invoking God as our witness drags God's name down. The more easily such swearing is used, the more easily lies arise. We must use the oath sparingly. The exceptional and serious character of the oath corresponds to the preciousness of God's name" (Douma).³²

God's name is taken in vain when we swear lightly and irreverently, using the Name of God with as little respect as we would show to that of a man, or when we swear falsely and are guilty of perjury. When we are placed on oath and we attest that to be true which we do not know to be true, or which we know to be false, we are guilty of one of the gravest sins which man can possibly commit, for he has solemnly called upon the great God to witness that which the father of lies has prompted him to speak. "He that swareth in the earth shall swear by the God of Truth" (Isa.65:16), and therefore it behooves him to consider well whether what he deposes is true or not. Alas, oaths have become so excessively multiplied among us—being interwoven, as it were, into the body politic—and so generally disregarded, that the enormity of this offense is scarcely considered. "Let none of you imagine evil in your hearts; against his neighbor; and love no false oaths, for all these are things that I hate, saith the LORD" (Zech.8:17).³³

(2) Speaking of God in an empty or flippant manner. "We take His name in vain when we use His name in idle discourse. He is not to be spoken of but with a holy awe upon our hearts. To bring His name in at every turn, when we are not thinking of Him, to say, 'O God!' or 'O Christ!' or 'As God shall save my soul'—is to take God's name in vain. How many are guilty here! Though they have God in their mouths, they have the devil in their hearts. It is a wonder that fire does not come out from the Lord to consume them" (Watson).³⁴ "We take His name in vain when we carelessly, lightly, and without reverence say: 'Oh Lord, oh God, oh Jesus!'—doing so out of custom, when astonished, in pain, in foolish joking to stir up laughter, or whatever the case may be" (Brakel).³⁵ "God's name is used vainly and irreverently in thanksgivings to God, and salutations. How formally and lightly will many say, 'God be thanked' 'Blessed be God,' when the very show of their countenance declares they have no grateful sense of God's goodness, nor reverence of Him on their spirits? So 'Godspeed' 'God be with you,' are good prayers indeed, but mostly used so formally, that they are but an abusing of that holy name" (Boston).³⁶

God's name is taken in vain by us when we use it without due consideration and reverence. Whenever we make mention of Him before whom the seraphim veil their faces, we ought seriously and solemnly to ponder His infinite majesty and glory and bow our hearts in deepest prostration before that Name. They who think and speak of the great God promiscuously and at random—how can they use His Name with reverence when all the rest of their discourse is filled with froth and vanity? That Name is not to be sported with and tossed to and fro upon every light tongue. O my reader, form the habit of solemnly considering whose Name it is you are about to utter—that it is the Name of Him who is present with you, hearing you pronounce it, who is jeal-

³² J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 91

³³ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 19

³⁴ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 85

³⁵ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:122

³⁶ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:166

ous of His honor, and who will dreadfully avenge Himself upon those who slight Him.³⁷

(3) Approaching God in a distracted or heartless disposition. We take His name in vain when we worship Him with our lips but not our hearts. "God calls for the heart, 'My son, give me thy heart' (Prov.23:26). The heart is the chief thing in religion; it draws the will and affections after it. The heart is the incense that perfumes our holy things; is the altar that sanctifies the offering. When we seem to worship God, but withdraw our heart from Him, we take His name in vain. 'This people draw near Me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me' (Isa.29:13)" (Watson).³⁸ "We are guilty of this awful sin when we perform holy duties lightly and mechanically, our affections not being in them. Prayer without practice is blasphemy, and to speak to God with our lips while our hearts are far from Him is but mocking of Him and an increasing of our condemnation" (Pink).³⁹ "The ordinances of God are profaned and abused either when they are quite neglected (Acts 7:42-43), or when they are attended in a formal, superficial, and customary manner, without seeking to meet with God in them, or to have spiritual food and nourishment to our souls by them (Isa.29:13-14)" (Fisher).⁴⁰

God's ordinances are profaned and abused: (1) When persons are irreverent in their attendance upon them, in regard of the outward gesture of their bodies, laughing, talking, sleeping, or any other way indecently behaving themselves in the time of prayer, preaching, singing, receiving the sacrament, or any other part of God's worship. (2) When persons are slight and formal, as to the inward form of their minds; when their minds are roving and wondering, and their hearts are dead and dull, every unbeseeming the majesty of God, whom in His ordinances they wait upon, who being a Spirit, does chiefly look to the spiritual part of His service. (3) When they make a profession or religion, and attend upon ordinances, that they may be accounted religious by men, without any sincere endeavors to approve the heart unto God; making use of religion only as a cloak for covetousness or maliciousness.⁴¹

We profane His word when we read or hear it with indifference; we profane the ordinance of prayer when we honor God with our lips but our hearts are far from Him; we profane the ordinance of praise when we feel no admiration of His excellencies, and no gratitude for His favors; we profane the Lord's Supper when we partake of it in a state of sin, in the absence of spiritual affections, without a cordial reliance upon the atonement which it commemorates, and an unreserved dedication of ourselves to Him who died for us and rose again. We profane the ordinance of fasting when our professions of repentance are not accompanied with humiliation of soul. We profane Providence when we turn it to superstitious purposes, looking for signs from it to direct us where Scripture or even reason is sufficient to guide us.⁴²

³⁷ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 18

³⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 85-86

³⁹ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 19

⁴⁰ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 284

⁴¹ Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism Explained from Scripture*, 135

⁴² John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:450