

Exodus 20:4-6 (The Third Commandment)

Q. What does God require in the first, second, and third commandments?

A. First, that we know and trust God as the only true and living God. Second, that we avoid all idolatry and do not worship God improperly. Third, that we treat God's name with fear and reverence, honoring also his Word and works.

Text: **Exodus 20:7** (LSB)

"You shall not take¹ the name of Yahweh your God in vain, for Yahweh will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain."

Before we look at this specific command, it would be helpful to remember a some "laws" or "rules" of interpretation that John Sailhamer gives regarding how we are to understand and live out the Decalogue:²

1. These are commands, and not suggestions. There is a weightiness – an oughtness – that the Ten Commandments carry. They "must" be obeyed, not merely should be obeyed.
2. The moral law is always "double-sided." That is, "it commands and prohibits, for every moral act at the same time requires refraining from a contrary mode of action, and every forbidden evil has its opposite good being encouraged."³
3. If the mere omission of doing a thing forbidden is all that is commanded, there would be nothing moral in the matter – mere avoidance or inactivity is not full or true obedience.
4. When a command is stated, everything contrary is virtually stated.
5. It is easier to state in a few words what cannot be done; the law can be stated negatively more succinctly.⁴

¹ Literally, the text reads, "You shall not lift up [לֹא תִשָּׂא] the name of YHWH, your God, unto/for vanity."

² John Sailhamer, "Genesis" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. vol. 1* (Zondervan, 2008), 477-78.

³ For example, the prayer, "Our Father, may Your name be hallowed...on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9).

⁴ Douglas Stuart writes, "The commandment is worded generally enough to encompass any misuse of Yahweh's name – from making light of it to overtly mocking it, to speaking about Yahweh in any way disrespectfully...to

With this in mind, we can now look at some of the key Hebrew words of the third commandment:

1. “Take”

Literally, the verb (*nasa'*) means “to lift, carry, bear.”

- If “lift” is meant, it carries the idea perhaps of making a deceitful oath that is, “perjury.”⁵
 - **Lev. 19:12** (LSB) – “And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am Yahweh.”
 - **Gen. 27:20** (LSB) – “Then Isaac said to his son, ‘How is it that you have found *it* so quickly, my son?’ And [Jacob] said, ‘Because Yahweh your God caused *it* to happen to me.’”
- “Lift” could also refer to invoking Yahweh’s name in prayer or prophecies flippantly.
 - Cf. The false prophets who “prophesy falsely (*sheqer*) in My name.” (Jer. 23:25 [LSB], etc.)
- “Lifting” Yahweh’s name could even refer to Israel using His name in magical incantations or pagan rituals.⁶
- If “carry” or “bear” is meant, the idea of living inconsistently as God’s covenant people, who bear or carry His name before the nations.⁷
 - **Lev. 22:31-33** (LSB) – “So you shall keep My commandments and do them; I am Yahweh. And you shall not profane My holy name, but I

having one’s family look “orthodox” when in fact their beliefs were pagan/idolatrous.” In Douglas Stuart, “Exodus” in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 2 (B & H, 2006), 455-56.

⁵ This would be the view of Stuart, who states, “The primary meaning of “misuse the name of the LORD” would appear to be invoking His name as guarantor or one’s words. In Douglas Stuart, “Exodus” in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 2 (B & H, 2006), 455.

⁶ Duane Garrett says this is “a third way someone in the ancient world might have taken God’s name in vain (i.e., by using it as a magical term to make a spell or incantation more potent. The Egyptians thought that there was great power in knowing a god’s secret name; the goddess Isis in one myth gains power over Re by learning his secret name (cf. also Acts 19:13-16). In Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus* (Kregel Academic, 2014), 477.

⁷ Victor Hamilton writes, “20:7 may be saying, Either honor my name, both by the way you live and by the way you talk, or else dissociate yourself from my name.” In Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2011), 336.

will be treated as holy among the sons of Israel; I am Yahweh who makes you holy, who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be your God; I am Yahweh.”

→ Cf. **Psalm 50**; cf. Lev. 19:2; 20:26, etc.

- **Rom. 2:23-24** (LSB) – “You who boast in the Law⁸, through your transgression of the Law, do you dishonor God? For, ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,’ just as it is written.”

2. “Name”

To the Jews, names were precious. They are to us as well, for no one likes having their name – or their mother’s – ridiculed, twisted, treated with levity, or made fun of. The Third Commandment reminds us that God especially takes His name serious, and that those who love Him should as well, for to love Yahweh *is* to love His name (e.g. Pss. 5:11; 69:36; 119:32), and to believe in Him is to “have life in His name (cf. John 20:31; 1 John 5:13).

Sailhamer writes,

“Name” [here] stands for so much more than the mere pronouncing of His title of address. It includes: (1) His nature, being, and very person (Psa. 20:1; Luke 24:47; John 1:12), (2) His teaching or doctrine (Psa. 22:22; John 17:6, 26), and (3) His moral and ethical teaching (Mic. 4:5).⁹

Douglas Stuart notes,

Yahweh’s name signified His essence. In any culture, modern or ancient, a name is a verbal symbol for a person or thing, and the ancients obviously appreciated the way names connoted the very value, character, and influence of a person or thing. To speak Yahweh’s name was to recognize His awesome power and holiness.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. v. 17, where Paul says these persons who bear the name “Jew” were those who also “boast in God.” To boast in the Law, then, is to also boast in God – Yahweh – the One who gave Israel His Law on Mount Sinai.

⁹ Sailhamer, “Exodus” in *EBC*, 481.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 456.

DeYoung, commenting on Exodus 33, says:

Moses asks God to *show* him His glory. And in reply, God *speaks* to him His name: ‘I will make all My goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you My name ‘The LORD’ (v.19a). The way to see God’s glory is to hear His name. To know the name YHWH, the merciful and gracious one, is not merely to know something about God; it is to know God Himself (Exo. 34:6-8). God shows Himself by speaking His name.¹¹

Moriarty writes,

God’s name – Yahweh – was so sacred to the Jews that it was pronounced only once a year by the high priest when giving the blessing on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27).¹²

Because God is “weighty” (*khavōd*), we must treat His name as weighty, that is with respect, reverence, and caution. Since Yahweh has “exalted above all things His name” (Psa. 138:2, ESV), we should, in the words of Calvin, “be zealous and careful to honor His name with godly reverence.”¹³

Over and over, the Scriptures tell us that Yahweh does things “for His name’s sake” – that is, His reputation, glory, and fame; for in to glorify Yahweh’s “name” was to glorify Yahweh Himself:

- **Psa. 115:1** (LSB) – “Not to us, O Yahweh, not to us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth.”

3. “In Vain”

The word rendered by the majority of English translations as “vain” (אִשָּׁר) describes unreality. HALOT lists the following uses:

¹¹ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Crossway, 2018), 55.

¹² Michael G. Moriarty, *The Perfect Ten* (Zondervan, 1999), 80.

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), 2.8.22.

- a. Worthless, emptiness¹⁴, without result,¹⁵ falsely
- b. Deceit, fraud¹⁶
- c. In vain

To this, Hamilton adds that the Hebrew word sometimes takes the meaning of “an idol.”¹⁷

- **Psa. 24:4** (NIV) – “who does not lift up his soul to an idol.”¹⁸
- **Psa. 26:6** (VJH) = “I do not sit with idol worshipers” (עַם-מְתִי-שׁוֹא)¹⁹
- **Psa. 31:6** (LSB) – “I hate those who regard worthless idols (הַבְּלִי-שׁוֹא), but I trust in Yahweh.”

When we remember the initial context, namely that Yahweh was speaking to a people who had just been redeemed out of a pagan, polytheistic nation, we can why He would warn them about taking His sacred name and perhaps attributing it falsely to an idol – the very thing they did in Exodus 32!!

Consequences:

As Garrett notes,

The punishment for breaking this commandment remains unspecified and therefore could in theory take any form of God’s choosing, from something relatively minor to death.²⁰

When we consider the severity of blasphemy in the OT,²¹ we need to understand that taking Yahweh’s name in vain is no trifling matter, and that the certainty of

¹⁴ David Wells calls this trivializing God in such a way as evoking a “weightlessness” about Him. In his book, “The God who is There,” D.A. Carson recalls the story of the man who, after being admonished for blaspheming the name of God, replied, “I didn’t mean anything by it.” To which Carson responded, “Precisely.”

¹⁵ DeYoung writes, “A joking, lighthearted approach to the Lord’s name is inappropriate...like breaking into the “Hallelujah Chorus” when our team scores a touchdown.” In his *TTC*, 60.

¹⁶ DeYoung says, “Whenever we attach God’s name to lies, half-truths, or ill-conceived purposes, we break the third commandment,” and would include casually throwing around phrases like, “God told me to do this.” In his *TTC*, 57.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 336.

¹⁸ לֹא-נִשְׂא לְשׁוֹא נַפְשִׁי (LSB = “worthlessness”; ESV, CSB = “what is false”; NAB = “useless things”)

¹⁹ ESV = “I do not sit with men of falsehood.”

²⁰ Garrett, *Exodus*, 456. He notes that in Jeremiah especially, false prophets are threatened with death for speaking falsely in Yahweh’s name.

²¹ See Leviticus 24:13-16.

punishment is promised by Yahweh is something that ought to give us pause before we speak God's holy, majestic, and wonderful Name.

Conclusion:

The Third Commandment thus prohibits the use of God's name for any idle, frivolous, or insincere purpose. This would include perjury, pagan incantations, using Yahweh's name as a swear/curse word, or using it idly/frivolously.²² God's name is to be treated with reverence and respect because it is the name of the holy God.²³

Soli Deo Gloria!!

Appendix: Watson on the Third Commandment

Thomas Watson²⁴ lists a whopping twelve (!) ways we can take the name of God in vain, of which I will highlight a few:

1. When we speak irreverently or slightly of His name

When we mention the names of kings, we give them some title of honor, such as 'excellent majesty'; so should we speak of God with the sacred reverence that is due to the infinite majesty of heaven.

- According to Deuteronomy 28:58 (LSB), Yahweh is Israel's God's "glorious and fearful name."
- This sacred and covenantal name of God, is, according to Jesus, "to be hallowed" (LSB, ESV, KJV), "to be honored as holy" (CSB), to be "kept holy" (NLT).

2. When we profess God's name, but do not live answerably to it

²² DeYoung neatly, and helpfully alliterates: falsely, frivolously, as a phony.

²³ See NET note on Exodus 20:7.

²⁴ See Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981 repr.), 84-93.

When men's tongues and lives are contrary to one another, they abuse God's name. Pretended holiness is double wickedness.

- Titus 1:16 (LSB) – “They profess to know God, but by *their* works they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient and unfit for any good work.”
- Romans 2:24 (LSB) – “For THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU, just as it is written.”

3. When we use God's name in idle discourse

He is not to be spoken of but with a holy awe upon our hearts. To say, ‘O God!’ or ‘O Christ!’ is to take His name in vain. Though may be in the mouth, the devil is in the heart.

4. When we worship Him with our lips, but not with our hearts

The heart 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.

- Mark 7:6 – “And He said to them, ‘Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDS OF MEN.”²⁵

5. When we pray to Him, but do not believe Him

Faith is a grace that greatly honors God. But when we pray to God, but do not mix faith with our prayer, we take His name in vain.

- 1 John 5:10 (LSB) – “The one who does not believe God has made Him a liar.”
- Romans 14:23b (LSB) – “And whatever is not done from faith is sin.”

6. When we in any way profane and abuse His word

²⁵ Citing Isaiah 29:13

To hear a wicked man who wallows in sin talk of God and religion is offensive; it is taking God's name in vain. When the word of God is in a drunkard's mouth, it is like a pearl hung about a swine.

Under the law, the lips of the leper were to be covered (Leviticus 13:45). The lips of a profaned, drunken minister ought to be covered; he is unfit to speak God's word, because he takes His name in vain.

This includes speaking jestingly of God's word. To play with Scripture shows a very profane heart.

7. When we make rash and unlawful vows

"Swear not at all" (cf. Matthew 5:34), that is, rashly and sinfully, so as to take God's name in vain.

- Deuteronomy 6:13 (LSB) – "Yahweh your God shall you fear; and Him you shall serve; and by His name you shall swear."

8. When we speak evil of God

Swearers, like mad dogs, fly in the face of heaven; and when they are angered, spue out their blasphemous venom on God's sacred majesty. Some, in gaming, when things go ross and the dice runs against them, run against God in oaths and curses. Augustine says, "They do no less sin who blaspheme Christ now in heaven, than the Jews did who crucified Him on earth."

This would include murmuring at His providences, as if He had dealt hardly with us. Murmurings spring from a bitter root; it reproaches God and thus takes His name in vain.

9. Perjury

Perjury is calling God to witness to a lie.

- Leviticus 19:11-12 (LSB) – "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am Yahweh."

10. When falsify our promise

As when we say, if God spare our life we will do a certain thing, and never intend it. Our promise should be sacred and inviolable; but, if we make a promise, and mention God's name in it, but never intend to keep it, it is a double sin; it is telling a lie *and* taking God's name in vain.

As Watson notes, sometimes God punishes swearing and blaspheming in this life (cf. Leviticus 24:11, 23); if not, God promises that their doom will most certainly come. He will not remit their guilt, and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).