

Loving His Commandments

The Third Commandment-B

Exodus 20:7
Part Eight

With Study Questions

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3/11/2018

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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 found 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.

We are now discussing 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"**.

First, we need to be clear on what the **"name of the Lord"** even means. Concerning the name of God, Charles Hodge states,

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.¹

We discussed last time that this commandment does not forbid oaths entirely. It does forbid spurious and thoughtless oaths and vows. The basic thought behind using God's name in vain means to attach emptiness to it.

Perhaps the most common understanding we have of using God's name in vain is profanity or even as an interjection of exclamation. We should be careful to avoid associating God's name with that which is common or mundane. We also discussed talking about God without putting much thought behind our words. This included developing a sub-cultural vernacular (referencing God without a great deal of thought behind it) and "vain janglings", where confident assertions are made about God or the things of God without the requisite fear or study that should accompany these words.

We continue.

One-Upping Others

I mentioned in our last meeting that I would share a conclusion I came to when it came to my own transgression of this commandment. And because of my own weakness and failure in this particular action, I have sought, not only to be aware of it in my own life, but to aid others as well.

As we grow in the faith, we begin to develop a more mature understanding of the word of God. With that, we find that error is easier to spot. Assuming, for the sake of this discussion that we are correct in our assessment of error (we must always have the humility to recognize that it may be 'me' who needs correcting), addressing the error is its own art. I have a boatload of conversations I would love to have back.

It's not as if I entered in to these conversations about God and the things of God with the intentions of using God's name in an empty way. But conversations take funny turns. It is easy to feel attacked, wounded, insecure and frustrated when someone is resisting or not grasping what you're seeking to explain. Suddenly we find ourselves trying to save face or to avoid humiliation. So, we attack back. We're like a reporter looking

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

for that gotcha moment.

Or we vent. There is a selfish, unhealthy catharsis our flesh enjoys when we become infuriated and lash out. But if there is error (whether moral or theological), we are counseled by the Apostle Paul to...

...restore in a spirit of gentleness. Keep(ing) watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

The basic feel of this exhortation carries the idea that it may very well be you or me who falls into error (perhaps tempted in the very conversation where we are seeking to restore the erring brother/sister) and how would we desire to be restored? There may come a time for a more forceful confrontation. Certain people may respond better or worse with various methods of confrontation. Paul writes,

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person (Colossians 4:6).

This is a lifelong skill to be pursued. But the point I would like to make is that to use one's faith, knowledge of God and the Scriptures to somehow lord over others is a violation of the third commandment. It is a common temptation to one-up others by using the name and ways of God. To use your knowledge of the Scriptures to win an argument rather than to bless, or even lovingly convict a brother or a sister, is a very common example of the violation of the this commandment.

I made a commitment long ago (not suggesting here that I always succeed) to be careful to see when a conversation had degenerated 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 knowledge or gifts God has given me for this empty pursuit.

Guilt and Manipulation

Using the name of God for the expressed purpose of manipulation or making others feel guilty is a violation of this commandment. To guilt somebody into doing what you desire, and using the Scriptures as your

personal instrument to accomplish this, is a sin. It might be a husband or a father misusing his God-given authority. It might be a wife disrespecting her husband because of some personal “call” she has decided God has on her life.

I knew a 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. That may have been a violation of this commandment.

Dishonest Gain

Perhaps the most popular and egregious violation of this commandment in modern western evangelicalism is to be found with televangelism. Robert Tilton, Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Jesse DuPlantis² and Benny Hinn, to name a few, are, in my opinion, 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 and adulterated word of God, breeding upon the weak and the sick for financial gain. In the many years I worked with the elderly, it was common for the widows to come to me with mailers they had received from these ungodly organizations asking for money and promising blessings in return.

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

² I am reminded of a recent conversation between Duplantis and Copeland where they explained to each other why they needed private jets. A commercial airline was too full of demons and would obstruct and otherwise interfere with their communication with God. Add to that, now that they were famous, it would be an inconvenience to be recognized and have people randomly asking for prayer.

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 Peter 2:13-17).

Hallowed Be Thy Name

When Jesus was asked how we should pray, His opening comment was that the name of God be **“hallowed”** (holy, sacred or set apart) 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. His name is to occupy a hallowed place in our hearts and on our lips.

If I may seek to place my finger upon our own spiritual nerves when it comes to the primary institution God has chosen to reveal His name, the church. I have to believe that one of violations of this commandment occurs within the hearts of God's own people as we come to church – this problem stems from another issue – one involving our understanding of church itself.

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? Don't misunderstand, at a certain level there may be some legitimacy to these expectations. All who are involved in leading should seek to be excellent.

Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts (Psalm 33:3).

David was said to be...

...prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him (1 Samuel 16:18).

Paul viewed himself in a ministerial sense as...

...a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it (1 Corinthians 3:10).

Apollos was said to be

...an eloquent (*logios*-learned, cultured, skilled in knowledge) man, competent in the Scriptures...being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus (Acts 18:24, 25).

And to be sure, the apostle taught that in the church...

...all things should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Those who lead should be prayerful, thoughtful, deliberate, seeking to excel to the best of our God-given, Spirit-gifted ability. We should know who we are serving and our preparation and desire for a skillful presentation should govern our hearts.

The Upper Room

But this desire to know the august nature of the One who has called us to Himself in the gathering of His people is not restricted to those who lead. In a sense, we are all cast members in a production where God is the singular audience. If we are willing to critique those who lead in singing, how well would do if critiqued in our own participation in singing? If we are willing to critique the prayers and the sermon, how well would we do if we were critiqued on how we listened and prayed along?

And just in case this notion causes us to view God as some sort of

prima donna or worldly critic or fickle despot commandeering a theatre and demanding to be entertained, let us consider the upper room.

I wonder how our hearts would be affected if we were invited into the upper room, the day before the cross to hear the words of Christ as He instituted in the Lord's Supper in anticipation of His own crucifixion. Ponder for a moment how we might approach that room – what we might be thinking of as we sat in that room.

At what point would we begin to weep or fear? At what point would we begin to stop thinking about ourselves? At what point would we cease being critics? At what point would we begin to realize that no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot dispense with our selfishness in the face of such love and grace? Would our hands tremble as we held the cup realizing our need for it, yet also our unworthiness of it?

I am not seeking to point fingers any further than at my own heart. When I consider that I have made an effort, even my best effort, at appreciating this holy event and how far short I truly come from recognizing what God is doing among His people when they gather, I can come to no other conclusion than the reality that I am a law-breaker. And my peace in this holy gathering is not found in my own excellence--even in worship, but it is found in the One who has called us into His presence.

For what vain and empty reasons have we entered into His holy sanctuary today? Has this law revealed the depth of our sin before a holy God? If I were in the upper room, what would the next day be like? Would I gaze upon the cross more resolute about my need for it? Would 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?

The bad news is, we have no idea how cavernous and empty we are when it comes to properly handling the Name of God. The Good News is we have a Savior who kept this commandment without flaw. When we place our trust in Him, His righteousness becomes our righteousness.

Questions for Study and Meditation

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