

CHAPTER 6

*You Shall Not Take the Name of
the Lord Your God in Vain*

preserving God's name as holy in your home

Introduction

The most typical thought that arises when we consider third commandment usually has something to do with the gross profanity and blasphemy used by those outside of the family of faith. It is a natural thought, I suppose, even when considering the wording of the commandment itself: “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). The line of thinking is that a name is spoken, so when someone uses God's name irreverently, this commandment is broken. However, there is a depth to this commandment that will escape proper attention unless it is given proper consideration. Anytime anyone misrepresents God his name is taken in vain. Christians are even identified by his name and if they, through words or actions cause his name to be degraded, they have taken it in vain. Thinking through what this commandment teaches will help parents consider how to instruct their children to honor the Lord in keeping the third commandment.

Taking the Lord's Name in Vain in the Bible

Our first instinct about this commandment is correct, at least in a partial sense. The Bible certainly does condemn God's name being defamed through words. Leviticus 24:10-16 relays the account of one from the Israelite camp blaspheming the name of the Lord. The people of Israel stoned him to death for his offense. In this account we see blasphemy and taking the Lord's name in vain used synonymously. The act of blasphemy in Leviticus 24 is that of a man cursing the name of the Lord. Therefore we must understand that the third commandment does deal in part with the words we choose in relation to God. However, there are more implications to be drawn from the Scriptures as well.

The prophet Ezekiel helps us understand a broader application of the third commandment. In his description of the rebellion of the people of Israel he is charged by God to confront Israel with their disobedience. When they enter the land they set up places of sacrifice wherever they chose, they profaned the Sabbath, and generally disregarded God's law. God describes this act as blasphemy: "Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: In this also your fathers blasphemed me, by dealing treacherously with me." (Ezekiel 20:27). Through their actions they blasphemed God's name. They did not serve him in a way that brought him glory. As such the actions of the people of Israel caused God's name to be diminished in the sight of the surrounding pagan nations. The consequence for this behavior is exile (Ezekiel 20:34). This passage begins to help us understand how the commandment is broadened beyond simple speech and words. Beyond the scope of the reach of the commandment, the severity with which God views that sin is also clearly laid out through his response to that sin. To see the implications of the 3rd commandment, it will be beneficial to briefly consider how people who have gone before have worked through the requirements of this commandment.

Good and Necessary Consequence

In the first chapter we discussed the idea of synecdoche when it comes to understanding the commandments. One part may be used to represent a larger whole. Rule six of interpreting the commandments, as quoted from the *Westminster Larger Catechism* #99 stated that "under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto." It is important to remember that rule when looking at the implications of the commandments.

In applying the principles of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* to the third commandment, Matthew Henry, in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, lists five ways that the Christian could take God's

name in vain. First, he could do so through hypocrisy, professing to be Christ's disciple but not living like them; second, by breaking promises he makes to God; third, by using God's name or attributes rashly, meaning the gravity of the situation is not one which would justify its use; fourth, by false swearing, making promises he never intends to keep; and fifth, using God's name carelessly without thought for its significance.¹ When considering what Matthew Henry has to say, it would be wise to admit that all have more work to do to ensure they are honoring the Savior not only by how they utter his name, but also by how they represent his name.

John Calvin, the famous French reformer, describes the breadth of the commandment as follows: "The aim and object of the Commandment is...that the honour due to God may be unsullied; that we should only speak of Him religiously; that becoming veneration of Him should be maintained among us."² Calvin also points us in the proper direction when it comes to understanding how to apply this commandment in our families. There is a greater concern than simply taking God's name in vain through our speech, although that certainly is to be addressed immediately in a Christian home. The concern should be more inclusive than the words we utter. So the task in this chapter is to discern the implications of this commandment in families.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* arrives at a proper, more broad understanding of the commandment's application. In its discussion of what is forbidden in this commandment (Q/A #55), the catechism forbids the profaning or abusing of anything that God uses to make himself known. God makes himself known through his word, in his giving us his name and telling us of his attributes. However, God is also known through his people. We are called by his name and serve as his representatives either for good or for bad. In 1 Timothy 6:1, the apostle Paul urges Christians who are slaves to honor their masters so that God's name would not be "reviled." The effect of taking God's name in vain is that sense of reviling. To defame God's name is to defile his name. On the other hand, in 2 Thessalonians 1:12 Paul prays God will fulfill every work of faith in them so God's name would be glorified because of them. This passage records the opposite virtue. Faith serves to glorify God's name. So each extreme is portrayed. God is evaluated in the eyes of the watching world through the actions of his people. Their watching eyes have sure implications for our living. If we are his representatives, it surely should affect our actions.

In Colossians 3:17 we read: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (ESV). Whether speaking or

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Volume I, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Guardian Press, 1976), 211.

² John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Volume II, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2009), 409.

doing, Christians do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus. To live in the name of the Lord, means living as his representative. The Christian bears his name by identifying himself with Christ. When anyone is called Christian, his actions reflect on the name he bears. Whatever he does, whether in word or in deed he is to be acting as representatives of Christ. When misrepresenting him by doing that which is sinful, the Christian brings shame on his name and treats it vainly, disregarding the high esteem with which we ought to treat it. The Christian's use of the name of God is certainly being considered, but more broadly, actions in general must also be examined in light of the testimony born through actions.

When it comes to parenting, the third commandment should be approached with this understanding. Speech and actions are both in view, and so the category is very broad. For the sake of giving some focus this chapter will primarily address violations of the 3rd commandment related to language as they manifest themselves in the home.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

The third commandment teaches God's people to be reverent in their use of God's name in their speaking. Language is used to interact with the people who share our environment. The third commandment teaches proper honor and glory to be given to God as people interact with each other. That means parents have to take time to teach their children what kind of language is acceptable in the home. Below, I will take some time to examine common ways the third commandment can be applied in families. By putting these suggestions into practice parents will give children healthy boundaries within which they can develop in practicing honoring God's name with their lips.

Prohibit Using Unkind Words.

In the book of Colossians, Paul urges the believer to put on kindness, among other things, in the process of his sanctification (Colossians 3:12). When man identifies himself with Christ, he is to be growing in kindness. How often is this reflection of God's character maligned in Christian homes through the use of unkind speech? Since Christian homes are made up of sinners living together in close proximity, there is going to be disagreement and tense moments in relationships. I am not promoting some kind of artificial happiness that must be enforced. However, what I am saying is that, as those responsible for the upbringing of their children, parents should not allow their children to speak unkindly to each other. That means derogatory tones and words should not be permitted. When children choose to use those tones with each other — and they will — it is the parents' job to step in and address their behavior.

When children are young, these moments represents an opportunity to teach them what a kind tone sounds like by modeling it for them. If children have already received this kind of instruction from the parents, they may need to bring correction into their lives. If the observed behavior is new to the child, it may be appropriate to remind them they are not speaking kindly. If the child is ignoring previously given instruction parents may need to bring correction into their lives which requires additional discernment about the frequency and intent of the sin.

After proper discipline is administered to the child, parents should ask themselves where the child learned this tone. Parental example, television shows or movies, siblings, or friends are all possible sources. Parents must ask these questions so they can begin to teach their children about what reflects well on the Lord. There must be a constant assessment if the family, following dad and mom's leadership, are allowing bad habits to form through influences children are allowed to be under. The Christian father is to train his children in the fear of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), and cannot tolerate any influence that would work against our purposes.

If parents permit unkind speech in the home they are allowing their children cast God's people in an unfavorable light and therefore violate the third commandment. Instead of teaching them to live as an ambassador of Christ, they permit them to falsely represent the one they are supposed to be serving. Christ certainly had harsh words for those who lived in sin, as can be seen in how he treats the Pharisees. But he was also gentle in how he dealt with people. For example, he welcomed the presence of little children where his disciples wanted to push them away (Mark 10:14). He spoke gently to the rich young ruler who was seeking to earn his way into God's favor (Mark 10:21). Instead of allowing children to deal harshly and unkindly with their siblings, teach them to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and to be kind and tenderhearted with each other (Ephesians 4:32). In doing so they will represent God according to his word. They will not take his name in vain.

Profanity.

It is not necessary to spend too much time on this subject because I think the biblical conclusions are simple. Most Christians look at passages like Ephesians 5:4 and realize profanity has no place in the life of the believer: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving." In this verse, God charges us to avoid obscene talk and crude joking. Even the pagan knows this kind of talk, at least in certain circumstances, is inappropriate. Television stations still censor the "four letter words" because there is an innate awareness that this kind of talk is not for the ears of little children. If the pagan knows it, how much more the Christian parent. Do not allow profanity in your home.

Raising Your Voice

There is a well-known saying about parenting which goes something like: in parenting more behavior is caught than taught. When it comes to learning to be a proper ambassador for Christ, parents have more sway than anyone. They have the opportunity to teach their children from God's word, and then to live out this teaching to validate what they have taught. One of the most common ways in which actions negate parental instructions is how parents handle the pressures of the day. If Christians struggle with controlling anger, the solution is not to say to the children, "Do as I say, not as I do." There is nothing that will be more detrimental to what you are trying to accomplish as mom or dad than setting an example of hypocrisy. In Colossians 3:8, wrath and anger are among the sins a born-again believer is to put to death. In holding on to those sinful expressions Christian parents misrepresent Christ to their children. Many will struggle in this area, and it can be addressed by seeking forgiveness from God and from our children, not by excusing it. The work of sanctification involves diligently dealing with the sin that dwells within, through the Holy Spirit's power. While being sanctified by God themselves, parents also apply God's standards of behavior to their children.

Children must not be allowed to express themselves inappropriately while being ruled by their emotions. If they try parents must correct them. One way to teach through this moment is to have the offender take a moment and compose themselves. If the child is very young, removing them from the situation and placing them in their crib or other restricted area should be enough for them to eventually calm down. If the child is older, and able to reason, the child must still exercise self-control. Once self-control is regained, the child could be asked to explain how they should have behaved differently. If they cannot find an appropriate answer, lead them on with some probing questions. For example, they may be asked, "What does the Bible tell you about how you are to behave toward others?" The expected answer would be, "To be kind." The next question would then be, "Are you being kind to your brother?" The child should be able to recognize that he was not. The parent can then help the child see how to properly deal with these stressful situations. For example, they may ask, "What can you do when your brother or sister provoke you to sin? What can you do when you begin to feel angry?" Answers could include, "Seek justice from mom or dad," "Leave the room," or other choices like that. The point is to be faithful in our role as leaders in the home. Parents are responsible that those committed to their care are not permitted to violate the third commandment, either through their words or through their deeds. Christians live in Jesus' name and they may not misrepresent him through neglect of his commandments.

The Silent Treatment.

Sometimes people think that nothing could be less offensive to communication than silence. However, silence can be just like shouting. Some will resort to raising their voices and losing their tempers when angered. Others will clam up and keep to ourselves. In some instances it is certainly wise to keep from speaking. The Bible speaks to this very principle. For example, Proverbs 17:28 says, “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.” So silence, in many occasions, can be a wise approach. However, silence can also be used to punish those who have caused offense.

The “silent treatment” is really just a form manipulation in relationships. What the user of this technique is trying to accomplish is to exact sufficient vengeance on the one who has offended them until they are satisfied their victim has “paid the price”. The purpose of their behavior is different from trying to show restraint in the use of their words. In fact, this behavior really is an evidence of an unwillingness to forgive, or an unwillingness to reconcile. As God’s image bearers they are taking his name in vain, because God is a forgiving God. As a result, the Bible gives us clear instructions on how to deal with issues that require forgiveness. In Paul’s description of the new life given to those who are in Christ in Ephesians he instructs the Christian to be “kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32). In the Christian family, the orientation must be steered away from the natural desire to serve self. Being in Christ, he is a new creation. As has been seen in Colossians 3:17, Christians are challenged to show thankfulness for Christ’s work of redemption in all that they say. To hold on to anger to exact vengeance is not Christ-likeness. Christians are called to forgive others in the same way as Christ forgave them. They are to teach that truth to their children, helping them understand that they are to follow their parent’s example, as their parents are followers of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). As a result of redemption and now being representatives of Christ, to live contrary to his instruction is to take his name in vain. However, Christians will make sinful choices and it is important to know how to deal with each moment.

Times will come in all families where children will offend each other. In those moments it is right to require the offender to seek forgiveness from the offended. However, there may be moments when the one who is wronged refuses to be reconciled. Child can refuse to accept an apology. To be certain, it is possible to force the offender to stand in front of the offended and begrudgingly mutter “Will you forgive me,” and extend a limp hand to press. Perhaps the silent treatment is better than such a half-hearted apology. Of course, that is said tongue-in-cheek. What would wisdom dictate? It would be wise to recognize the child’s need to gain some composure. It is quite possible that their

feelings have been hurt, or they need some extra time to gain some control over their emotions. That does not mean life continues as if there is nothing to forgive. Give them the chance to take some time to compose themselves before they are ready to accept the apology. However, accepting that apology, offered sincerely of course, will be the next action of their day. As they reflect, they should be preparing their hearts to forgive their brother just as in Christ God forgave them. There are times when a brief talk with Mom or Dad will help the child in this process. They may be able to lead them in prayer, or through discussion help them prepare their hearts to be gracious to their siblings or friends. But nothing else should happen in their lives until they are ready to reconcile. There should be no playing, visiting with other friends, play rehearsals, sports events, or anything else until such time as they have been reconciled.

Part of the difficulty of monitoring this process in the family is that parents cannot control the heart. They can put all the external restraints in place and children can still reconcile hypocritically. The next task, then, is to study what flows from the emotions of their heart. If, after some time, the reconciliation is proved insincere, parents should not be afraid to call them back. They should not allow themselves or their children to represent Christ vainly through false reconciliation. As already seen, the silent treatment is off limits because that is not how Christ forgives. Instead set before your children the positive alternative to the sinful choice of the silent treatment: forgiveness.

Christians look to the Bible for the virtue that stands in contrast to the silent treatment. One poignant illustration is found in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. The parable of the Prodigal Son change would change dramatically if the father had used the silent treatment. The son would have come home and spoken to his father, and the father would have turned on his heels and left him outside hungry and cold until he deemed he had suffered enough. That is not the account we find recorded there. Instead, the father runs to his son, holds his son, kisses his son, clothes his son, and lavishes his love on him, forgiving him completely. That is the picture Jesus gives of God's attitude in forgiveness. That is the attitude that should be sought when teaching children when it comes to using communication to deal with conflict in the home.

Interrupting

If the silent treatment is one extreme of sin in representing Christ in communication, interruption is the other. One deals with the withholding of words, the other with adding words when inappropriate. Interestingly enough, the same sin lies at its root: a sense of self-importance. The silent treatment says, "You will pay for what you did to me," thereby making self the center-point of the conflict. Interrupting makes the speaker more valuable than the persons currently engaged in conversation. My parents taught me this lesson while growing up in a busy home. I remember distinctly

being taught by them how to handle situations at church where I needed to speak with my parents while they were engaged in conversation. I was taught not to simply barge into the conversation and ask my question without consideration of the context. My parents told me that if I needed to ask something while they were already speaking with someone, I was to stand near them in a place where they could see me until they were able to find a break in the conversation and address my question. The same thing can be accomplished by teaching children to approach and put their hand on an arm, or some other signal to let the parents know they need their attention. Teaching this process to children is one of the tools parents have to help them know they are not the center of the universe. In doing so, they are taught them to walk in the footsteps of the one who saves his people: the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not come to be served, but to serve. Christians are to represent themselves, and their children, as those who are willing to serve, not as those who are expecting to be served. Children are allowed to take Christ's name in vain if they are taught to live as if they are the center of the universe. Teaching them to be patient in conversation is one way parents are able to give that idea some shape. Being a servant means waiting for another person to finish their thoughts before jumping in.

It is impossible to summarize all the ways we can take God's name in vain through communication. The reason the topic is so broad is because, in a sense, all of life bears witness to God. These five examples simply start down the path of considering the significance of communication. It is one of the ways that Christians either honor or dishonor their Redeemer in the eyes of a watching people.

Considering Our Actions

The next application of the third commandment I want to make looks more broadly at actions. In other words, how do God's children live in a world that dishonors him? Considering the life of the apostle Peter. There is a marked change in the life of Peter as recorded in the gospels. All four of the gospels record Peter's denial of the Lord Jesus. When pressed, Peter is not willing to live as Jesus' ambassador because he expects it will cost him too much. However, the Holy Spirit drastically changes him. Less than two months later, this denier of Christ stands before the same council who had condemned his Lord to death and tells them he must obey God rather than men (Acts 4:19-20). When he denies Jesus, he is taking God's name in vain, identifying himself with Christ only when it is convenient for him to do so. In that instance Peter actually also took the Lord's name in vain by calling curses down on himself (Matthew 26:74) *and* through the action of disassociating himself with the Savior.

Parents have been set over families as governors and teachers. As such, they are charged to watch over their lives and prepare them to be set free into adulthood. Through continuous investment into

their lives, parents are to lead them into living in conformity to God's law in order that they might properly glorify God the Creator and Redeemer. The level of diligence and effectiveness in parenting can often be addressed simply by asking a question: "Is there a difference between my children and the children of the world?" Christian families should look different from the family that is portrayed in the latest sitcom or reality television series. Christian families should look different from that of the unbelieving neighbor. Even if the unbelieving neighbor is raising a beautiful family, one aspect should always set the Christian home apart: love for God. Please do not misunderstand. I have lived next to some of the nicest non-Christian people you could ever meet. However, there still ought to be a difference, if in nothing else but the motives under which we operate flowing from love for God in Jesus Christ.

In a world where God is being pushed more and more into the background, Christian families function as representatives of Christ. People notice when the beauty of God's character is displayed in families. They notice when children are able to rejoice in the success of a sibling. They notice when a family works together to nurture one another. There are too many testimonies from families who sought to be faithful to God in just little things like using titles of respect for their fellow man, where people have seen something different about their family. In those moments your family is bearing the fruit of the Spirit and bears witness to the holiness of Christ. Christian families are set apart, called to be holy as God himself is holy. In those moments when people reach out to talk to you, you have gained an opportunity to tell others of why you do what you do: you are a new creation in Christ. In those moments you bear witness to his name and do not take it in vain. In that sense Christians view their families as an evidence of what Christ has completed in his people. In these situations, children reflect Christ, not their parents. The more diligent parents are to insist their children live in such a way as to glorify God, the more they will reflect his beauty. That is why it matters how children behave. That is why it is significant to have children speak respectfully. They are image bearers, living under Moral Law which reflects his character.

Some believe the child is not an image bearer until his heart is regenerate. However, remember the second use of the law too. The law is made to restrain sin in the lives of the unbeliever too. The third commandment exists to restrain sin in the life of all children and parents are the ones responsible to enforce it. Parents would think it unthinkable to have children to steal, or hit their siblings and friends, or throw a brick through their neighbor's front window. Despite the fact those are transgressions of God's law children are expected to obey those rules whether they are regenerate or not. To be consistent in not requiring obedience to God's law from unbelieving children would lead to the logical conclusion to allow them to commit the most heinous sins without correction. All parents choose boundaries for our children. The only proper guide for these boundaries is God's word.

By raising children in a home where the gospel is portrayed parents expose them to one of the normal ways God works to change a person. There are ordinary ways in which God communicates his grace to his people. One of the ways he does so is through his word. Through the reading of the Scriptures in the home, through faithful leadership in bringing families to church to hear the word preached, through prayer, by seeing the gospel on display in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, God works the miracle of re-birth. There is no magic in reading the Bible to your children. There are many study the Bible strictly on an academic level who will end their days unconverted. However, the Holy Spirit does work through his word to change the hearts of his people. Your child can be taught from an early age to recognize that he is an image bearer of Christ. He can be taught not to take the Lord's name in vain. Take that task seriously, parents.

Conclusion

When coming to the third commandment the initial impression may be that it is a commandment that is easy to keep. Do not verbally misuse God's name and all is well. Only when looking to the broader application of this commandment is it clear there are other implications too, especially in the sphere of communication. Parents need to teach their children that certain forms of communication have no place in the life of a Christian family. They must help their children navigate through common pitfalls of communication such as unkind speech, fits of anger, manipulation through the silent treatment, interrupting and other self-seeking actions. When parents fail to be faithful representatives of Christ, they take his name in vain. This realization ought to add urgency to their role of being faithful servants of Christ and godly examples in their homes.

Study Questions

1. What are the two different possible ways the Bible presents that the third commandment can be broken? Look at Leviticus 24:10-16 and Ezekiel 20:27 for help.
2. List the five different examples Matthew Henry gives of how people can break this commandment? Which is most prevalent culturally? Which is most prevalent in the church?
3. This chapter encourages you to correct unkind speech in your children. What are different ways you could bring correction for a child who is sinning in this way?
4. Compare and contrast the sins of giving someone the “silent treatment” and losing your temper with someone. In what way are they the same? In what way are they different? In what way do these sins take the Lord’s name in vain?
5. In what way can your actions take the Lord’s name in vain?