



The Ten Commandments

(13) The Third Commandment

(2) Specifics

Exodus 20:7

Matthew 5:33-37

Mark 3:22-30

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
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This is the second sermon on the Third Commandment. I had thought to preach only one sermon on this commandment, but by the time I was finished the first sermon, I realized that I had not dealt with some of the more obvious things that it forbids. Last time we looked at what is really the heart of the Third Commandment and that is the idea that we are to revere and worship God and that we are never to say or think or do anything that dishonors him. We explored that idea and spent time thinking about the question of why God is so insistent that he be honored and not dishonored. We saw that God's glory is the reason that we and everything else exists and that therefore it is the most important value that there is. There is nothing more important than that God be glorified and the opposite of that is also true. For God to be dishonored is the greatest negative and thus also the greatest sin. So, it is right and proper that God should insist that we use his name with great care and reverence. It would be wrong for him not to do so. He would be taking his own name in vain if he did not uphold the honor of his name.

Now the sin that we most often think about in connection with this command is the sin of using God's name as a curse-word or in any other frivolous way. To take God's name in vain is to use it to curse another person, or just to curse in general or even in an empty and frivolous or meaningless way. It is noteworthy that God's name is used in vain more than it is used reverently and meaningfully. A very high percentage of

people use the phrase “O my God” to express mild or great surprise. It is so common that it even has the short form of OMG so that it can easily be used while texting.

Using God’s name in this way is an example of taking God’s name in vain. Whether it is used as a curse or as an expression of surprise it dishonors God to use his holy name in these ways. As we saw last week taking God’s name in vain goes deeper than this – it has to do with the requirement that we revere God in our hearts as well as by our words. But this is one important application of the Third Commandment. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, “The third commandment requires the holy and reverent use of God’s names, titles, qualities, regulations, word, and works.” Anything that is associated with God must be handled with care and reverence.

So, we should check our speech and our typical expressions to make sure that we are not using God’s name in a frivolous way. That would include expressions that are derivatives of actual curse words or the names of God – such as “gawl darn” or “gosh” or “Jeez.” These terms are used because of a discomfort with using the actual name of God, but they are close enough that it’s obvious what is meant. The Third Commandment requires that we use God’s name with great respect and that means that we must rid our speech of anything that involves using God’s name disrespectfully.

Another area that the Third Commandment deals with is the swearing of oaths. When we swear an oath, we call God to witness that what we are saying is true. We can say, “I swear to God that what I am saying is true.” By speaking this way, we are appealing to God as a witness that what we are saying is the truth. And such language should not be used in a frivolous way. We should not be swearing oaths in our everyday conversation. I remember children using oaths to reinforce the truthfulness of some statement. When I was young, which is quite a long time ago, children used to say, “Cross my heart, hope to die” to support what they were saying. That is a self-maledictory oath. It means, “May God strike me dead, if I am not telling the truth.” I don’t know if kids still talk that way, but we must understand that it is a sin

against the Third Commandment. It is a form of taking God's name in vain.

Now Jesus tells us that we should not swear at all. Matthew 5:33–37,
"33“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’" 34But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."

At first glance that makes it seem that all swearing is wrong. But Jesus here is addressing something that some of the Jewish people were doing. He deals with this in Matthew 23. When people wanted to make a promise that they did not intend to keep, they would swear by something close to God that was not God. So, they would swear by the temple or they would swear by the gold of the temple or they would swear by the altar or they would swear by what was bound on the altar. They did this to make their oath less binding. They figured it was less serious to fail to keep a promise if they swore by the temple instead of swearing by God. Jesus taught that to swear by the temple was to swear by the one who dwells in the temple.

So, his point in Matthew 5:33-37 is that we should not swear frivolously. There is no need to swear oaths in everyday conversation. We are simply to be honest in our speech. Matthew 5:37 "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."

We know that Jesus did not intend to teach that we should never swear an oath because Jesus allowed himself to be put under oath during the trial that led to his crucifixion. In Matthew 26:63 the high priest says to Jesus, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus replies, "You have said so." By saying "I adjure you," the High Priest was putting Jesus under oath and Jesus did not object to that. That makes it clear that it is proper to swear an oath in a court of law or in another similar situation.

We also have the example of Paul swearing an oath in Romans 1:9 where he says, “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my Spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers...” Clearly there are situations in which an oath is proper and necessary. If it is done seriously and respectfully it is not taking God’s name in vain. But clearly if it is done casually and if the words that are spoken are not true words, then it is clearly an example of taking God’s name in vain.

And that we must not do. If we call God to witness that what we are saying is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and we do not tell the truth, we are using the name of God in a dishonoring way and so we are taking the name of the Lord in vain. If we would do such a thing in court we would be showing contempt for the court, but we would also be showing contempt for God. So, the command not to take God’s name in vain covers using God’s name as a filler in our everyday speech. It also covers swearing oaths in situations in which oaths are not necessary such as everyday speech. And it covers not telling the truth under oath in situations in which an oath is appropriate.

There is a third form of taking God’s name in vain that I want to cover at this point and that is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The word “blasphemy” is another word for taking God’s name in vain. The *Dictionary of Bible Themes* defines “blasphemy” as “The profaning, desecration and taking in vain of the name of God, or the reviling of any of his works or deeds. It is strongly forbidden by God as dishonoring to his name.” In the gospels, Jesus refers to a sin for which there is no forgiveness and he calls it “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.”

Here is how Jesus puts this in Mark 3:28-30. ²⁸“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— ³⁰for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.” So, this is a particularly grievous form of taking God’s name in vain. Clearly from what we have been seeing in our study of this command, every instance of taking God’s name in vain is serious. The command itself warns that “the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” But in most cases, it is possible to be

forgiven for breaking the Third Commandment. Jesus says this in the passage from Mark that I have just quoted. “[A]ll sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter....” But blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is a separate category. Jesus says, “[Whoever] blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Now in order to understand what it means to blaspheme the Holy Spirit we need to consider the situation that gave rise to Jesus’ saying about this sin. Certain religious scholars had accused Jesus of being possessed by the devil. They were saying, “by the prince of demons he casts out the demons.” It was this that Jesus called blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The truth was that Jesus was casting out the demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. That means that these religious scholars were saying that Jesus was possessed by the devil when in fact he was possessed by the Holy Spirit. So, they were attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil. And so, they were blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. And that sin, Jesus says, will not be forgiven.

Now this begs the question of why is this sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit more serious than blaspheming the Father or blaspheming Jesus himself? Actually, there is no difference. What Jesus called blaspheming against the Holy Spirit was attributing what Jesus was doing through the Spirit to the devil. Whenever God works in the world he does so through the Holy Spirit. That means that blaspheming the Holy Spirit occurs when people who are opponents of God and his kingdom attribute whatever God is doing in the world to the devil. It is a spirit of hostility to God and his battle with Satan and attributing what God does through the Spirit to the devil.

This is a serious warning to those who are fighting against God’s purposes as these religious leaders of the Jews were fighting against Jesus. When such people attribute what God is doing in the world through his Spirit to the devil, they are crossing a line that puts them beyond the possibility of forgiveness. The result of this is that they will never be convicted of their sin; they will never come to see their sin; they will never have the desire or the inclination to turn from their sins and even ask for forgiveness.

One implication of this is that anyone who is troubled by his or her sin and is seeking forgiveness from God through Christ has not committed the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. To know that you are a sinner and to be troubled by your sin and to confess your sins and to ask for forgiveness – all of that is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit and so it means that the Holy Spirit is working in you. Those who have committed the unforgiveable sin will never come to the point of confessing their sins and seeking forgiveness. The result of being abandoned by God is hardening of heart so that there is no desire or inclination to turn from sin to God. And so, the common saying that if you are worried about the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit you have not committed it, is true. Those who are concerned about this matter have no reason to be.

But it is a serious warning for those who are drifting away from the LORD. It is a serious warning for those who are growing in enmity against God and his people. It is a serious warning for those who are flirting with the world. Our hearts can be gradually hardened against God. And if we are on that track there may come a time when such a grievous sin as blaspheming the Holy Spirit becomes possible. So, the fact that there is such a sin as blaspheming the Holy Spirit which will never be forgiven is a warning to all of us not to trifle with sin and worldliness. One thing can lead to another. The hardening of our hearts is progressive. And it is possible to come to the point of no return.

However, there is gospel in this subject because before he speaks about the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, Jesus affirms, “Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter....” When we think of our lives in the light of God’s command not to take his name in vain, we will all find much to confess. God requires that we always think and speak of him with utmost reverence and we do not do that. We may not be in the habit of cursing and deliberately dishonoring God’s name, but we all sin by using God’s name without the care and reverence that it deserves. And when we realize that, it is wonderful to hear our Saviour say “all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter....” This is why Jesus came. He came to live and die so that his people might be forgiven all their sins and accepted as righteous before God. Through

believing in him and through confessing our sins and turning from them we are or can be completely forgiven and embraced by God as those who have never sinned.

This is the context in which we must understand every part of God's law including the Third Commandment. If we are trusting in Christ, the law does not condemn us. It exposes our sins, but through faith in Christ those sins are forgiven. We are right with God. The penalty has been paid. And the purpose of the law is to show us the way to live that reflects God's character and that is pleasing to God. The law no longer condemns us. Rather we are delivered from the power of sin so that we are now able to begin to keep the law which is the way of life and blessing. If we are in Christ, the law no longer condemns us. Rather it has been written on our hearts so that we see how good it is and what a blessing it is to keep it.

So, we have looked at some of the specific things that the Third Commandment forbids. We have seen that it forbids cursing and other ways of using God's name without reverence. We have looked at the matter of swearing oaths and we have considered the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What we will now do is consider the ways of using God's name that the Third Commandment requires. It is expressed as a negative. "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain." But the negative implies a positive. The Third commandment requires that we exalt the name of the Lord. It requires that we glorify the name of the LORD our God.

The perfect example of this is Jesus Christ. John 17 gives us some insights concerning Jesus and the name of his Father. John 17 records Jesus praying to his Father. In verse 4 he says, "I have glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." In verse 6 he says, I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world." In verse 26 he says, "I have made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known...."

Jesus kept the Third Commandment perfectly. Not only did he not take the name of God in vain, he glorified that name. He did that by accomplishing the work that the Father had given him to do and he did that by making God's name known to his followers. Jesus is the perfect

model for us of what it means to keep the Third Commandment. But he also kept the Third Commandment in our place so that his perfect record of keeping also this commandment is imputed to us when we believe in Jesus. When we see Jesus using his Father's name with honor and reverence, we see what the Father sees when he looks upon us in Christ. That is a huge comfort for us when we think of how we are not only forgiven for the many times that we break the Third Commandment, we are also counted righteous – that is we are counted as having kept the Third Commandment every day of our lives. This is what it means to be justified by faith in Jesus Christ. His righteousness becomes ours.

But Jesus is also our example. And one of the things he did with the name of his Father is he made it known. The Third Commandment is about honoring the name of God. An important part of the way that we do that is by causing God's name to be known. This ties in with what we were thinking about last week in connection with the Third Commandment. The most important value in all the world is the glory of God. That is why the world exists. That is why we exist. That is why we are saved. The purpose of our lives is to glorify God. Another way of saying the same thing is to say that the purpose of our lives is to glorify the name of God. And one of the key ways of doing that is to make God's name known. It is to hold up the name of God to our fellow human beings so that they might come to know and glorify that name as well.

We see this concern expressed in the Lord's Prayer which Jesus gave as a model for our prayers. The first petition of the Lord's Prayer is "hallowed be your name." So, we are to pray that the name of our Father in heaven be hallowed. This is to be the first concern of our prayers. And of course, that is to be reflected in our lives as well. The Third Commandment has to do with honoring the name of God and one of the ways that that happens is when the name of the Lord is held up before men to be admired and praised.

God's name is hallowed also when we live our lives as God would have us live them. Jesus said to his Father, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." This is also a way to

keep the Third Commandment: accomplishing the work that God has given us to do. Jesus did that by speaking of God and keeping God's law and laying down his life for his people. We do that when we live the life that Jesus saved us to live. There is a connection between Jesus accomplishing the work that the Father gave him to do and us living out of the work that Jesus did for our salvation. And that is an important way that we bring honor to the name of God.

So, the Third Commandment is all about being zealous for the honor of God's name. We can be zealous for the honor of God's name by not taking it in vain – by not cursing and not using it frivolously, by keeping the oaths that we swear, by not living in such a way as to bring dishonor upon that name. And we can be zealous for the honor of God's name by making it known – by speaking of it before men – by calling people to submit to that name and to believe on that name and by living in such a way that reflects well on the name of our God.

And that of course includes the name of Jesus. We honor Jesus when we believe in his name and when we acknowledge him as our Saviour and our Lord. We can tell the world that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 2:12). We can imitate the apostles who, when they were persecuted, rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." We can prayerfully seek to "fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in [us], and [we] in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

And we have the great task and blessing of worship. Hebrews 13:15 "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name."

"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." At first glance we may feel that we have kept this command if we do not curse or use God's name in an irreverent way. And that is certainly part of it. But there is so much more. The principle that this command expresses is God's great passion for the glory of his name and in order to keep this commandment we must share that passion.

We do not share that passion by nature, but we do share it by grace if we are united to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. If that is the case we are being conformed to the image of Christ who could say at the end of his life on earth, “I have glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” That is the best possible goal for our lives. Christ lived the most worthwhile life that was ever lived. And he calls us to follow him – to imitate him in fulfilling our purpose in life by seeking the glory of God by accomplishing the work that God has given us to do. That is a life worth living. And that is the life we are enabled to live through grace – through the power of the Holy Spirit – through the outworking of the work that Jesus accomplished and through which he glorified his Father.