



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

4930 S. Hagadorn Rd., E. Lansing, MI 48823 - 517.351.6810

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- 99 **Q.** *What is God's will for us in the third commandment?*
A. That we neither blaspheme nor misuse the name of God by cursing, perjury, or unnecessary oaths, nor share in such horrible sins by being silent bystanders. In a word, it requires that we use the holy name of God only with reverence and awe, so that we may properly confess him, pray to him, and praise him in everything we do and say.
- 100 **Q.** *Is blasphemy of God's name by swearing and cursing really such serious sin that God is angry also with those who do not do all they can to help prevent it and forbid it?*
A. Yes, indeed. No sin is greater, no sin makes God more angry than blaspheming his name. That is why he commanded the death penalty for it.

The third commandment forbids taking the Lord's name in vain. That is, we are not to empty the Lord's name of its meaning or use it in a careless or wicked way.

The Old Testament had a broad catalogue of sins that were seen as violations of the third commandment. Blaspheming or cursing the name of God is the most obvious example (see the story of the son who was stoned to death for blasphemy in Leviticus 24). Uttering empty or false oaths were also violations of the third commandment (Lev. 19:12; Hosea 10:4), as were giving false visions or false prophecies (cf. Ezekiel 13, 21, 22). Sorcery, which involved calling on the Lord in an effort to manipulate his power, seems to have violated the third commandment, too (2 Chr. 33:4-7). Strangely enough, sacrificing your children to the god Molech was also viewed as profaning the name of the Lord (Lev. 18:21). The rationale seems to be that if an Israelite were to commit such a heinous sin he would dishonor the name of Yahweh to whom he had sworn allegiance (cf. Lev. 20:3). Similarly, the Lord's name was considered profaned when priests cut corners in their prescribed sacrifices (Mal. 1:6ff), when the people unlawfully touched holy things (Lev. 22:2), and when they put detestable things in holy places (Jer. 7:30). The third commandment concerned more than just the use of the tongue. It applied to many different areas of Israelite life. Wherever the people or things which belonged to the Lord were defiled, the Lord—whose name they bore—

was also dishonored and the third commandment broken.

Our name is more important than we often realize. A name marks us, identifies us, and over time as people get to know us, our name embodies who we are. If someone mentions the name "Trisha DeYoung" a whole bunch of emotions and experiences flood my head and heart. If you ridiculed this name or used it in an empty or wicked way, though you were only speaking words, I would take it as a personal affront to my wife. The person and the name cannot be easily separated.

This is especially true for God. God's name is the sum of his person, identity and character. When Moses wondered what to tell the Israelites about this God who would rescue them, the Lord responded by defining himself with the name "I Am" (Exod. 3:13-15). When Moses wanted to see God's glory, the Lord agreed to proclaim his name before him (33:18-19). God's old covenant name, Yahweh, was not a literary placeholder. It was God's sacred name which captured something of his unrivaled power and glory.

It's no surprise, then, that everywhere in Scripture the name of the Lord is exalted in the highest possible terms. Psalm 8 declares, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth." The first petition of the Lord's prayer asks, "Hallowed be thy name." The Apostles proclaimed about Jesus Christ that there was

no other name under heaven whereby we may be saved (Acts 4:12, cf. 3:16). Paul assured the Romans that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). And the end goal of all creation is that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. The Jews were superstitious to forbid the use of the name YHWH, but their instincts to honor God’s name were commendable. “Give glory due his name,” is the Psalmist word to all of us.

Historically, the application of the third commandment has been very broad. We see that in Answer 99, where mention is made not just of blaspheming or cursing, but also perjury, unnecessary oaths, and standing silently instead of doing all we can to speak against them and prevent them (cf. Q/A 100). Early ethics manuals used the third commandment to condemn random Bible direction, improper use of verses, and biblical crossword puzzles. Early Reformed theologians also objected to the use of dice and games of chance by appealing to the third commandment. They felt like casting lots was a form of prayer and to be casting lots in a game was calling upon the name of God in a vain manner.

We don’t need to agree with all of these prohibitions to agree that the third commandment speaks to more than just foul language. Of course, it speaks to this issue as well. Although modern cursing is somewhat different than its Old Testament counterpart, where cursing meant a careful rejection of God and not merely a bad habit, still, it says something disturbing about our attitude toward God if we can use his name so lightly and carelessly. There is no place in the Christian life for using the name of our Creator and Savior as an expression of shock, outrage, or anger. If we are in the habit of letting “Jeez!” and “Oh my God” fly all over the place, we should ask God for better self-control that his name might not be dishonored by our thoughtless language.

But, as I said, there are other issues related to the third commandment besides a potty mouth. The third commandment also speaks against vain repetition of the Lord’s name. We are not heard for our many words, Jesus reminds us (Matt. 6:7). We do not want to babble on like the pagans do, carelessly inserting the Lord’s name in our prayers like a comma (“Dear God, we just come to you, God, for O God, Lord, you’re just awesome Father. God we need you Lord. Jesus be with us, Lord God, just help us, Father.”) Of course, a sincere heart counts for something, but praying like this does nothing to reverence God’s name.

Moreover, in keeping the third commandment, we must not use God’s name, to quote Calvin, “for purposes of our own ambition, avarice, or amusement.” This means

we must not peddle the word of God for profit. And it means that a joking, light-hearted approach to the Lord’s name is inappropriate. I like humor about Christian idiosyncrasies and the foibles of church culture. But joking about God is another matter entirely. Would you go into a black community on Martin Luther King Jr. holiday and open up with a joke “So MLK walks into a bar...”? Such an approach, with its flippant attitude to someone special, would be offensive to most of us, just as careless tossing around God’s name for our amusement is offensive to God.

Similarly, we should not invoke the name of God as a means of manipulating a situation or in hopes that God will grant us immediate power just by virtue of repeating his name. Of course, there is a place for healing in Jesus’ name and casting out demons in Jesus’ name. But we don’t want to get into the habit of carelessly invoking the name of Jesus like some magic incantation (e.g., “In the name of Jesus may this car start.” “In the name of Jesus may my stock portfolio grow”). Along these lines, I would also caution us against unreservedly putting God’s name, and thereby his stamp of approval, on our plans as if they were his revealed will. Christians fall into this trap when they say things like “God told me to tell you” or “God wants us to build a new church” or by attaching God’s name to specific policy proposals so that voting for a minimum wage increase or for strict constructionist judges is clearly “the Christian thing to do.”

In addition to prohibitions, one could also think of many things the third commandment requires. We ought to laud God’s actions as good, just, and wise, and not profane his name by accusing him of evil, getting angry at him, or encouraging others to “forgive” God. Further, we ought to call on God as Father. I think it profanes the name of the Lord when out of feminist sensibilities we refuse to call God “our Father” and name him as he has named himself. We ought also to speak of God by the name of Jesus Christ. Those who call on God by some other name are not honoring God as he has revealed himself in the New Testament. Finally, we ought to act, think, feel, and speak as is befitting those who are called by the holy name of God. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. So when we live unholy lives, we besmirch the name by which we are called. People sometimes get very particular that they don’t want to be called a “Christian,” but insist on “Jesus follower” or “disciples of the Messiah” or something like that. I understand they are trying to distance themselves from stereotypes, but let’s not be ashamed of the name “Christian.” It is our family name. Instead of being embarrassed to be called “little Christs” (see Acts 11), let us exhort one another to live lives that honor the name instead of taking it in vain.

written by: Kevin DeYoung