

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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"The Third Commandment"
Rev. Gise Van Baren

The third commandment, as recorded in Exodus 20:7, states, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain."

As in the preceding commandments, this one is based on the perfections of the Sovereign God. The first commandment is founded upon the truth that God is One--therefore there can be no other gods which man can have. The second commandment follows out of the truth that God is Infinite, that is without measurement or limit. Therefore images which necessarily limit may not be made of God. In this third commandment one must recognize the truth that God is absolutely holy. It is this holiness, revealed to man through God's Names, which must be maintained in the way of using God's Names properly.

The third commandment is one commonly violated. It seems that there is no concern today about the awfulness of abusing the Name of the Holy God. Cursing is commonly and daily heard on the street. Swearing is part of literature and drama. None seem to find all of this very offensive. And, sadly, it must be confessed that often within the church there is also an imitation of this practice of the wicked.

The command, therefore must be heard repeatedly: do not take God's Name in vain! May we also remember that important command as we live and work in a world filled with violators thereof.

Why should God be so concerned with His Name? Children have a little rhyme which cutely states, "Sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can't hurt you." But what seems so true for children and people generally is obviously not true with God. He is deeply concerned with His own name. That Name may not be abused without terrible consequences.

But why is God so concerned with what appears to be such a minor thing: His Name? The names of men are not all that important. Each of you has a name. It was likely given to you by your parents. That name was given to you solely on the basis of the desire of your parents: they would name you after a close relative or give a name which was popular at the time. These names, though they likely have meanings, are not all that important. They distinguish one person from another--but these hardly identify the character and personality of an individual.

The Old Testament saints were more concerned about meanings of names. Parents would name children to give expression of their hope of salvation. Of Noah's father, for instance, we read in Genesis 5:29, "And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord hath cursed." The name Noah means literally, "rest."

Some of the Old Testament saints were even named by God Himself. One thinks of Abraham and Israel. In each case God gave these patriarchs names which described their spiritual position in God's plan of salvation.

When one considers the names of God, he observes that these names are not inventions of men. They are not names similar to our own. They are names given by God to Himself in order to reveal to us who and what He is. There are many names which God has given to Himself in Scripture: the Names Jehovah, Lord, Almighty, and others. Each reveals some aspect of the greatness of God. And in a sense all of the Bible is the revelation of the meanings of these Names of our God.

God's Names then reveal the perfectness, the holiness, the righteousness of Himself. They show that He is the Sovereign God, the Source of every good and perfect gift, the Unchangeable God. These Names are all

that we know of God. We cannot see God--for He is Spirit. We cannot touch nor handle Him. But we can know Him as He has been pleased to show Himself to the creature through His Names.

If we properly understand this, we can begin to understand also the third commandment. Because of the importance of His Name, He must insist that the Name be dealt with in reverence and with respect. Irreverence toward His Name is irreverence toward God. One cannot trample underfoot the Name of God without indicating the intention and desire to trample underfoot God Himself. It is a most heinous sin to use the Name of God in vain.

Yet in spite of the clear requirement of God's command, His Name is repeatedly abused by people of this earth. This is done in a variety of ways. Often the Name of God is repeatedly used in a conversation for, I suppose, the sake of emphasis. One often hears of "God" this and "God" that. Perhaps this is indicative of a paucity of language. But surely it is most degrading and clear violation of the command of the Almighty God. The same is very often done with the Name, "Jesus." Can one, with impunity, treat the Name of God as mud? Can one downgrade God to the level of man by using His Name with this abuse?

Those who so abuse the Name of God may think that they show their scorn and lack of fear for the living God. In a sense, they do show a fearless scorn of Him. But what utter fools who do so! Would one go into the wilds and deliberately twist the tail of a sleeping lion to prove his "bravery?" Such an one would not prove his "bravery" but would show rather his utter folly. Far more is this true with God. Any person who thinks he can "play around" with the Name of God as many do, are complete fools. Their judgment and condemnation is sure. The reaction of an irritated lion is nothing compared to the wrath of God Almighty.

Others, thinking themselves more refined, prefer to use euphemisms for the Names of God and of Jesus. Rather than using the Name "God," these would prefer to speak of "Gee" and "Jiminy Crickets." In doing this, such seem to show a measure of fear of the wrath of the Almighty. Yet they would still show their scorn and derision toward God. Using words deliberately chosen because they sound like the Name of God or Jesus is also violating the third command of God. One cannot be too careful with respect to the use of God's Names.

Many prefer to take to themselves the power of God--surely equivalent to the abuse of His Name. These can speak of "heaven" and "hell" as well as damning others as though it is within their power to assign others to these respective places. One may think it cute or perhaps emphatic to tell another to "go to hell," but he has assumed to himself a right which belongs only to God. How dare any stand, as it were, in God's place and give assignments of eternal destiny to fellow-men? God surely does not consider this to be a joking matter or an unimportant thing.

Often one hears too the perfections or attributes of God thrown around rather freely and loosely. The expressions "Goodness" and "Gracious" are considered to be rather refined ways of emphasis. Jesus said there is none good but God--yet we, knowing this, can use that Divine perfection in our common speech.

There is too, the careless use of the Name of God. One can be careless often in prayer to God. Though we address the Sovereign God, we sometimes can speak to Him as though He is nothing more than another creature. How often in our prayers is it not true that we hardly give thought to what we say? What kind of comment is this upon our own attitude towards the Name of Jehovah? We speak to Him in prayer--and often as quickly forget what we have said. We fail to show proper godly fear and reverence as we address Him. While trying to emphasize the closeness of God to us, we ignore His transcendence--that He is far above us.

We would not dare to approach the President of the United States this way. Yet we can come to God and treat Him as though He were our next-door neighbor. How dare we? Increasingly, there is heard such language emphasizing God's commonness with man which is nothing less than sacrilegious. It is demeaning to God. It is as stench in His nostrils.

Nor can one escape condemnation under the third commandment by refusal to use God's Name at all. Some have tried. Those of more polite and refined society may, possibly, never take God's Name upon their lips in cursing and swearing. In fact, they never make mention of the Name of God. But refusal to use God's Name at all, is also violation of the third command. One must use God's Name properly in worship and reverence. He may never ignore the Name!

Abominable too in the sight of God must be silence of those who hear others taking God's Name in vain. It is done at work and at play. Others mock God and abuse His Name. An individual may be greatly offended if his wife's name were so abused--but he says nothing about the abuse of the Name of God. Many, too, unthinkingly listen to God's Name abused on radio and television. Others read books and magazines which contain materials which so misuse the Name of God. Yet often this violation of God's command is ignored! Why? Can God be pleased with such literature, with such conversations, which abuse His Name? Of course He cannot be pleased. Nor may we be. We have the duty and opportunity to speak up to remind the disobedient that their abuse of God's Name is offensive both to God and to you. Nor ought we to fear the mockery because of this boldness on our part to maintain God's Holy Name.

God is justly angry against all of the misuse of His Name. In the Old Testament this was one of the crimes which required the death penalty! God demanded this. If this is such a serious sin, then every child of God must honor God's command with fear and trembling.

The Christian must rather use God's Name properly with godly fear and reverence. We need not to be afraid to use God's Name. He gave it for our proper use. But His Name must be used reverently. We are to do this in our prayers to Him. We can address God personally. We can present to Him all of our cares. He would have us to come to Him and ask according to our need.

We use His Name in worship. When we sing His praises and when we hear His Word proclaimed, He is honored in such use of His Name.

We speak together of His work. We declare to each other what God has done for our souls. He is pleased to have His Name used in that kind of conversation. There is that high calling to speak to Him and about Him in reverence.

And if we are truly interested in the Name of God, then we will with diligence study that which reveals God's Name: His Word. There He has unfolded His own greatness and glory. There we see the power of God in creating and sustaining everything. There is manifested His power in directing everything to His glory. And in Scripture is revealed His love and grace through the sending of His Son Jesus Christ. He who would truly honor God's Name, will study His Word.

Can any observe this third command of God properly? One cannot help but recall that disobedience is of long standing. Adam, our first father and representative head, first transgressed. In essence, he abused the Name of God in refusing to heed His command. He listened to the lie of the devil that God had deceived man in giving a command that he might not eat of one particular tree. Adam, thus, denied the Name of God which reveals that God is righteous and holy.

But it is also the very nature of man to continue to abuse the Name of God. We might readily condemn others who so freely can curse and swear. But is it not our nature to do likewise? Do we not use the Name of God carelessly? Do we not all too often condone and apparently approve others

abusing the Name of God through our silence? Are we not then also worthy of the sentence of God: death? Can we boast in ourselves and place ourselves above others? I am convinced that we cannot.

We must confess first of all that we can only stand before God with the confidence that He will not condemn us, when we stand on the basis of the completed and perfect work of Jesus on the cross. Jesus, the Son of God, born into our flesh, could bear all of the wrath of God for our sins. He could pay for our transgressions. For all of those times that we carelessly or deliberately violated this command, He took upon Himself the guilt of the sins of His people in this regard. He represented His people before the judgment seat of God--and provided for them the sure forgiveness of all their sins.

Thus the Christian stands boldly before God--not believing that he himself is without sin in this regard, but he is convinced that Jesus paid for these sins.

Our concern now is not to earn salvation through our obedience to the third command. Rather, knowing that his sins are all forgiven through Jesus' perfect work, the Christian now begins to obey in gratitude to God for the wonderful salvation he has received. He is made able to obey God's commands through the work of the Holy Spirit within him. The Spirit of God calls from darkness to the light. That same Spirit works in the heart the desire to serve and obey God. The Christian, therefore, wants to serve God in harmony with all of God's laws.

This means, in the first place, that where one continues to curse and swear, thus abusing God's Name, there is no evidence of regeneration and conversion. Let none call himself Christian who knows not how properly to use the Name of God!

But, secondly, where there is repentance and conversion, there one also beholds a godly, holy walk. There the Christian will diligently search out the Word of God that he may know, more and more, of the Name of his God. There he will worship God in the gathering of His people. Then the Christian will earnestly pray to Father in heaven that He may provide. Then will the saints gather together in order to speak often one with another of the glorious and great God Who has saved them through Jesus Christ.

Yes, indeed, the Name of God is highly honored by the child of God. He is greatly offended and says so, when others misuse that holy Name.

Now--what of yourself? What has been your position before that great Name of God Almighty? Have you been careless with that Name? Have you thoughtlessly abused it? Or have you, in silence, become party to the abuse of God's Name by others? Then I must say: Repent. You commit one of the most grievous sins imaginable. Even stealing or murder can hardly be compared with this awful sin. Repent before God and cry out for mercy--lest you be consumed in your transgressions.

Or, do you live a life of proper thanksgiving and gratitude to God? Do you use His Holy Name in devotion and praise? Then you understand the meaning of the third command. Our God is pleased that His people so serve Him and honor Him for His holiness and righteousness.

Rev. Gise Van Baren