

Sermon 66, What Is Required in the Third Commandment, Exodus 20:7

Proposition: The third commandment requires us to use and to bear God's name with holiness and reverence, in fullness as opposed to emptiness.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to the third commandment. We already saw that the first commandment is about which God to have as our God; the second is about how to worship our God; and the third commandment is about reverencing the name and thus the character and identity of our God. Tonight we will speak about what is positively required by this commandment, while next week we will look at what is forbidden in this commandment and the threat attached to it to enforce it. What we will see tonight is that God requires us to use His name and bear His name reverently, in a holy and full way rather than an empty way.

I. Knowing God's Name

Literally translated, the third commandment says "You shall not lift up to emptiness the name of Yahweh." As we find our way into this commandment, then, we will talk about the two different kinds of lifting up — saying the name and bearing the name. But before we can understand what

that is, we first must know what God's name is. In order to say the name and bear the name rightly, let's talk about His name.

A. His Names

If you remember, we have said all along that Exodus is the book of the knowledge of God. Early in the book, in chapter 3, the issue of God's name comes up. Moses says that the people will want to know who sent him; in response, God reveals His name.

1. Yahweh

That name is Yahweh, "He who is," paraphrased or stated by God in the first person as "I am who I am." As we said when we looked at this passage last year, the name of God indicates that He is self-existent, self-sufficient, underived. He is the source of everything and in need of nothing. That is the name of God. Do you speak about Him as Creator of Heaven and Earth, Lord of all, maker of all, the one of whom and through whom and to whom are all things?

2. Jesus

The second personal name which God has revealed is Jesus, "Yeshua," "Yahweh Saves." That is the name of the Son of God. Do you think of God according to His self-revelation in Jesus? Do you regard Him as merciful, forgiving, the dying God who rose again to save you?

3. Father, Son, Holy Spirit

And finally, the third name of God is the threefold, triune name. It is singular — the *name* of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. This name reveals God as Three Persons who each entirely hold the One Being of God. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God — yet the Father is not the Son, nor is the Son the Spirit or the Spirit the Father. They are three, irreducibly, yet also one. The Father begets, the Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds.

This name of God tells us that He is love. Within God Himself Three persons live.

B. Whatever He Uses to Make Himself Known

So to know God's name is to know who He is as Creator, Redeemer, and Three in One. Indeed, to know God's name is, in the final analysis, to know him. You can't take up God's name unless you know His name. If you don't know the names Yahweh, Jesus, Father, Son, and Spirit, you don't know God. Conversely, if you know these names and the fullness of what they mean, you at the very least know about God. Indeed, you know God if you truly know these names in their fullness.

How does God make Himself known? Not just by saying "Hi, I'm Yahweh. Nice to meet you." Oh no. He does much more than that. He tells us stories of His interactions — with Moses, Abraham, David, and more. He tells us what He loves and hates. He gives us these Ten Commandments. In other words, God reveals Himself through His word. The Bible explains what His name means. So do His works of creation. The beauty of the earth, the glory of the sky, the love that from our conception over and around us lies — these things too are works of God that reveal something of His name to us. Same goes, as the catechism says, for His titles and His laws.

Brothers and sisters, in order to obey the third commandment you know to know God's name. You need to know Him as Yahweh, as Jesus, as Father, Son, and Spirit. If you don't, you'll

never be able to take up His name. Indeed, for that matter, you need to know Him as God — as the supreme being, the greatest conceivable one.

II. Saying God's Name to Fullness

But the commandment requires not only knowing God's name, but also taking it up. The first way in which we take up God's name is by saying it. Talking about God is key to being a Christian. The commandment forbids saying God's name to emptiness or vanity.

A. Talking About God

So how do we speak of God to fullness? What the commandment means is a holy and reverent use of God's name, as opposed to an empty and meaningless repetition of it. You've all heard the prayers where "Lord" and "Jesus" are mentioned every third word. Brothers and sisters, that is a classic example of saying God's name in vain, of lifting it up to emptiness. If I'm talking to a guy named Joe, and I say, "Joe, what do you think, Joe? Joe, how'd it be if, Joe, you just, Joe, gave me a few bucks here, Joe?" That is the kind of thing the commandment forbids. We'll talk more about that next week. But conversely, what's required is that God's people always speak of Him meaningfully and with reverence. Your mention of God's name, even in ordinary conversation, needs to carry with it an appropriate sense of awe. God is not a doornail to be casually invoked. Yes, we can and should speak of Him, and name His name. But we should always say it like we believe in Him and fear His mighty rushing energy.

B. Holy Oaths

This is particularly true in oaths. Some of you served in responsible public positions as "sworn" personnel. In order to do your job, it was judged by the State of Wyoming or by the City of Gillette, etc. that you had to be bound with an oath. Brothers and sisters, that's a good thing. Every member of this church is bound with an oath to follow Jesus Christ. Every president of the United States has to swear to preserve, protect, and defend the constitution of the United States. It's adding the words "So help me God" that confirm the status of this affirmation as an oath. To make an oath is to call God as your witness. You invoke Him as the omniscient, righteous one who cannot and will not lie — and you say "If I'm lying, God knows. But actually, He knows that I am telling the truth."

This is something required by the third commandment. If you are called upon to swear, whether in your calling or in a role as witness in a trial, for instance, you must invoke God's name with an appropriate sense of awe and reverence. You may not lie under oath; you may not break the law when under oath to uphold the law. Brothers and sisters, the degree that you lift up God's name to fullness is the degree to which your word will be trustworthy. Yes, Jesus tells us that we don't have to swear to make simple affirmations, and that to honor God's name requires us to tell the truth at all times. The ninth commandment in particular addresses the issue of truth-telling. But when more is called for than a simple affirmation, you must swear by God's name in order to honor Him.

C. Worship

You are also called on to take up God's name to fullness in your worship. In the days of Seth men began to call upon the name of Yahweh.

1. Prayer

That is a reference to prayer. They were asking God to live up to His name, to be what He had promised to be. When you pray, you need to speak to God respectfully, with a due sense of awe and reverence. Parents, hopefully you have all corrected your children at times: “That’s not how you talk to your mother!” Well, I’m here to say that it is quite possible for us to pray half-heartedly, to pray insultingly, to pray in a way that makes the godly want to say “That’s not how you talk to your Father!” This commandment requires that you invoke God’s name in prayer rightly.

2. Praise

Same with praise. Just shouting “Great is Jesus of the Christians” for two hours is not an acceptable way to invoke the name of Christ. You must speak and sing His name when praising Him in a way that shows you honor Him.

3. Teaching

Same goes for teaching about God. There is a theologian from St. Andrews in Scotland — Oliver Crisp. I can’t stand his writing because he writes about God with such a flippant tone! Much of what he has to say is accurate, I believe, but his attitude drives me bonkers. Frankly, I find him unreadable because he seems to have no respect for the holy things about which he writes. It is required of theologians, pastors, and Sunday School teachers that we show respect and honor for the living God whenever and however we speak of Him. Yes, this sometimes almost becomes self-parody. Old pastors pronounce the word “God” in such an artificially deep and sonorous voice that I occasionally wince. They are trying to go out of their way to make it clear that they admire and worship the one of whom they speak, but sometimes they overdo it and their very overdoing it becomes absurd.

D. Being Sure God Has Authorized Everything to which You Attach His Name

So what’s the upshot of the third commandment’s demand that we lift up God’s name to fullness? I find it in this: You must be sure, very sure, that God has authorized everything to which you attach His name. We’ll talk more about the negative side of this next week — the prosperity preachers, etc. who say “God told me” and then spout a bunch of arrant nonsense. But positively, it means that you need to know the difference between your opinions and the word of God. You are free, for instance, to be a political pundit and to pontificate about world affairs and domestic policies. Go for it. But God will not hold you guiltless if you attach His name to your punditry. He swears, right here in this command, that He won’t. My medical opinions, your financial opinions, your best friend’s views on foreign policy and my best friend’s views on energy policy are all fine and good. But they are not God’s views. There is not just one Christian position on fossil fuels or foreign policy. And so don’t you dare attach God’s name to your views and say to everyone else, “God wants the Iran deal to happen” or “God doesn’t want the Iran deal to happen.” “God believes in drilling in ANWR” has no more biblical support than “God believes in providing a place for animals to roam free without drilling rigs.”

It is this area, I think, more than anything else, where the church is failing right now. We may be a little confused about how to apply some of the rest of the commandments. We are terrible at keeping the Sabbath, doing a poor job of communicating Biblical sexual morality, and more. But in different denominations and circles of Christians we have taken various policy positions and baptized them as the Christian way — the point of the documents of Vatican II calling for comprehensive unemployment coverage in the name of God. Brothers and sisters, nothing will damage God’s name more quickly than hitching it to a politician. Nothing. Politics is a foodfight and always has been. Claiming that God is on the side of drenching the enemy with tomato sauce, or that He is on the side of smearing cake on the adversary’s face, is flat-out false, and makes God look stupid.

Where we break most of the other commandments, we at least have the faint idea that we might be doing something wrong. But Christians the world over are proud of lifting up God’s name to vanity in pursuit of their own pet politics, politicians, and policies. Is God more pleased with non-believer Donald Trump or with professing Christian who supports murder Joe Biden? Listen: We have no business attaching God’s name to either one of these men. Yes, we are called on to make a responsible choice. But it is the height of irresponsibility to attach God’s name to them. God’s name is to be attached only to things we know He supports. That would be love, joy, and peace. That would be having no other Gods and keeping His worship pure. That would be making disciples, baptizing, and teaching. God endorses those things. He doesn’t endorse particular candidates, platforms, or pundits.

So attach God’s name to your church, to your family, even to your school — but don’t attach it to your candidate or to your business. He has not authorized those things.

III. Bearing God’s Name to Fullness

But we don’t just name the name of God.

A. We Are Called by God’s Name, 2 Chron. 7:14, 1 Pet. 4:16

We bear the name of God. That’s what it means to be a Christian. “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1Pe 4:16 NIV). You bear the name of Christ. “If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face,” and so on — the famous verse 2 Chronicles 7:14 — also emphasizes that we carry God’s name. We lift it up, not just with our tongues, but with our persons. We are called by the name of God. Whatever you say or don’t say, whether you pronounce God’s name with exaggerated care, or never pronounce it all, your life reflects on God’s name.

B. Your Life Reflects on God’s Name

This commandment, then, requires you to walk worthy of the name by which you are called. In order not to take God’s name in vain, you have to live as is proper for a Christian. You have to be someone who acts like a believer, someone for whom the name of Jesus is actually fitting.

What does that look like? It looks like someone who keeps all ten commandments. It looks like someone who actively participates in organized Christianity. It looks like doing the things God wants you to do. It looks, in fact, like all of you. But this is an area for lifelong work and improvement. Our life reflects on the name of God.

IV. Making God Weighty

In short, brothers and sisters, what is the opposite of emptiness? The most obvious answer is “fullness.” But you can also make a case that it is “weightiness.” As my childhood pastor always said, the sin forbidden in the third commandment is the sin of taking God lightly, and thus the duty required in this commandment is the duty of making God weighty. He has to be the heaviest influence in your life. He has to matter to you more than anything else — the opinion of your friends, the pressure of your family, the desires of your boss, your need to make money and provide for your family — all of these things have to give way to God’s desires. That’s what this commandment means; that’s what it requires.

God’s name was weightier to Jesus than any other consideration. What is His prayer in John 12:28? “Father, glorify thy name.” That is what your Savior came to do. That is what you and I are called to do too. Amen.