

Sermon 67, What Is Forbidden in the Third Commandment, Exodus 20:7

Proposition: The third commandment forbids all empty saying and bearing of God's name — for those who do this will not go unpunished.

- I. Verbally Lifting up God's Name to Emptiness
 - A. Oaths
 - 1. Saying "Oh my God," etc.
 - 2. Minced Oaths
 - 3. Careless Oaths
 - B. Blasphemy
 - C. Thoughtless Worship
 - D. Attaching God's Name to Something without His Approval
- II. Bearing God's Name to Emptiness
 - A. Causing God's Name to be Blasphemed
 - B. Living in a way that Discredits God
- III. Taking God & His Punishments Lightly

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last week that the third commandment requires us to be mentally engaged in speaking about God and bearing God's name. When you stop thinking, you need to stop praying. Don't keep talking to or about God when you're no longer paying attention to yourself! But though we saw that reverent attention is required whenever we use and as long as we bear the name of God, this week I want to talk about the negative. We are forbidden to use God's name emptily. We are forbidden to bear God's name emptily — and if we do, He will not let us off the hook. He will regard us as guilty.

I. Verbally Lifting up God's Name to Emptiness

The first thing you must not do, per this command, is to verbally lift up God's name to emptiness. How do we do that?

A. Oaths

The first way is by dropping God's name in senseless and petty oaths. I have heard another pastor in this town commit this sin. I've heard a person in this congregation do it. And of course, my coworkers at Walmart and in construction did it all the time. You know what I'm talking about.

1. Saying "Oh my God," etc.

The first and most obvious sin forbidden in this commandment is the sin of saying "Oh God" or "Lordy" or "Christ!" as senseless and foolish exclamations to indicate surprise, disgust, etc. Brothers and sisters, that is not proper for saints! In fact, it is disgusting and sinful against God.

The unholy and empty use of the name of God Almighty to mean “This is surprising to me” is utterly forbidden by this commandment. Put in other terms, it is evil. If you want to offend God for no reason, throw His name around like it’s a four-letter word. By the way, this also goes for things that are holy through their association with God, like “damn” and “hell.”

“Were I an epicure, I could bate swearing,” says George Herbert. And it’s so true! Brothers and sisters, why on earth would you swear? It’s not as rewarding as gluttony or lust. It is a sin without a reason or a reward.

2. Minced Oaths

The same goes for minced oaths. These are transparent attempts to take God’s name in vain without saying “Oh my God.” There are many ways of cutting short God’s name. Gosh, golly, zounds, geez, sheesh, Chrissakes, and so on are all words that are clearly major syllabic sounds within the names of God, Jesus, or Christ. Brothers and sisters, to say any of those is to take God’s name lightly. They are off-limits for the Christian. Yes, I’m talking to you and saying on the authority of the word of God that it is a sin to say “Gosh.”

3. Careless Oaths

The same goes for any kind of invoking of God’s name without proper care. One major way we do this is by swearing oaths. Now, I don’t hear a lot of people saying “By God, I’ll settle him!” or “Jesus! I’ll get my revenge.” But I think that it is quite possible for us to be called into court and say “I swear to tell the truth, etc., so help me God” without thinking about the seriousness of what we’re doing. It’s possible to take an oath of office, whether as a peace officer, a magistrate, a minister of the gospel, a church member, or in some other calling without giving sufficient attention to the solemnity of what’s being done. Think about the number of marriages that end in divorce. Obviously all of those marriage vows took God’s name in vain, insofar as they vowed to build and keep their marriage with God’s help.

And what of other oaths? The one that comes to mind is the ubiquitous “F-cancer” sticker that I’ve seen on cars around town, including the vehicles of professing Christians. That is a sin against this commandment. Why? Because every curse is a way of calling on God. When you issue a general imperative, to whom are you issuing it? Am I, the reader of the bumper sticker, supposed to personally F-cancer? I don’t know how one would do such a thing. The one uttering the curse is not able to carry out his coarse wish either. Rather, “F-cancer” is a prayer directed to the Lord of Heaven and Earth. It’s a negative prayer, a prayer for something to be destroyed. It is what we traditionally call a curse. If I can’t do anything to you, if I’m too weak to actually carry out my rage against you and your ravages, then I open my mouth and curse you. Whether I mention the name of God or not is irrelevant. The very existence of the curse presupposes that there is someone to hear it and act upon it. We have all rebuked someone for threatening a machine. “It can’t hear you,” we say. And in the same way, the universe can’t hear you when you wish cancer to be f***ed. That is a prayer to God. When you say “Let’s go Brandon” to express your political opinions, you are not saying that you’re going to do it, that Mrs. Biden is going to do it, or even that Xi Jinping is going to do it. You are wishing for a more comprehensive

destruction to fall upon our president — the kind of destruction that ultimately could be delivered only by God Almighty.

Brothers and sisters, do you think of a curse as a form of prayer? When you wish destruction and ill health upon your political or financial foes, do you seriously consider what you are saying and to whom you are saying it? If not, then you need to repent. “Let’s go Brandon” and the other oaths common to our time and place are not neutral items. No one wishes cancer well. But asking God to perform a vulgar act to it is not right for a Christian or for anyone. It dishonors and abuses the name of God.

B. Blasphemy

The same goes, to a much greater extent, for blasphemy. This is the sin of deliberately repudiating God with harsh and aggressive language. I still remember being in the basement of a gorgeous old church building in London — St. Martin-in-the-fields, I think. Written on the back of the toilet in the stall I visited were the words “God is an English pig [expletive deleted].” I was horrified by the blasphemy of the graffiti artist who thought it hilarious to deface the toilets in a church in this way. Brothers and sisters, I know that verbal blasphemy is not a sin to which any of you are much tempted. Thank God. And strive to keep it that way. Know, too, that blasphemy through a godless life is only too common among church members. You can reflect badly on God’s name by having an affair with your secretary. You can reflect badly on God’s name by letting yourself gain 100 pounds through your gluttonous lifestyle. You can blaspheme, or bring others to blaspheme, in lots of heinous ways.

C. Thoughtless Worship

One way that we church folks often transgress is through our thoughtless worship. We stand before God here in this place and say a lot about Him for an hour at a stretch. This commandment forbids us to do that without engaging our minds and hearts. Saying “My Jesus, I love thee” while thinking about lunch is a way of lifting up God’s name to emptiness. Leading family worship while thinking about the hot date you have planned for later in the evening is a way of lifting up God’s name to emptiness.

D. Attaching God’s Name to Something without His Approval

And as we saw last time, God hates and damns the sin of attaching His name to something that He doesn’t approve of. As I said, that goes in spades for your political and medical opinions. But it also goes for your prayers. You claim to pray in Jesus’ name; I’ve heard you! But are you really taking good care to only ever ask for things that you are sure Jesus endorses? Brothers and sisters, we pin Jesus’ name to an awful lot of requests. Are we really certain that He is in favor of them all? We pin Him to a lot of causes; are we sure that He wants to be pinned to all of them?

Attaching God’s name to things is a pastime of the American church. We have Christian candy — Testaments! And God is not impressed with all these supposedly godly things. He wants us to focus on what He has attached His name to — His people, His word, His Son, His Spirit. He doesn’t want us to focus on other things to which we have attached his name without authorization.

II. Bearing God’s Name to Emptiness

He also wants us to obey Him in everything. As we saw last week, we bear His name. To be called “God’s people” is a privilege and a duty. And it is one that God’s people can and do mess up. We can deny our identity, or fail to live up to it. We can deny Christ with our words — that’s what we just discussed. But we can also deny Him with our actions.

A. Causing God’s Name to be Blasphemed

As Paul said to those who push the law of God on others while breaking it themselves, “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Rom 2:23-24 ESV). He was quoting from the prophet Nathan, speaking to David about his murder and adultery:

And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die. (2 Sa 12:13-14)

The enemies of God see someone who taught and preached the law of God fall into gross sin like adultery or murder, and they start to blaspheme. God’s name is dragged through the mud by Christians who are hypocrites. It goes for me and it goes for you. It goes for all of us.

B. Living in a way that Discredits God

Even if no one knows, even if no one says “Look at that Caleb Nelson and his interest in female celebrities; I think I’ll call God an English pig *#(^%\$ now,” the one who is living in a way that would bring discredit to God is guilty and needs to stop living that way.

III. Taking God & His Punishments Lightly

You see, if you don’t, God will take it out of your hide at one time or another. The older commentators referenced various gruesome stories, like the blasphemer whose tongue rotted out. I’m sure stuff like that has happened. But for the modern age, I think a better example is none other than William Jefferson Clinton. Famously, he lied under oath about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. As the *New York Daily News* put it, “Clinton denied he was having sexual relations with the White House intern, figuring that because the affair was long over, and because they did not engage in intercourse, he was not technically...” and so on. You can guess the rest. Well, brothers and sisters, apparently some controversy lingers over whether Slick Willy actually committed perjury. But if he did, he is still a poster child for this commandment. How so, you ask? Because he is prosperous, respected, without a care in the world, or at least so it would seem. His estimated net worth in October of last year was \$80 million — not in the billionaire club, but far from shabby.

Certainly, with the Senate voting to acquit him of the impeachment charges, he has escaped punishment from men for lying under oath. But the commandment does not say that perjurers will certainly be punished in this life. It says that God will certainly hold their sin against them.

This does not mean that Bill Clinton, and many a worse sinner than he, can’t be washed clean by the blood of Jesus. Rather, it simply means that God has not forgotten a violation of an

oath sworn in His sight to tell the truth. He will not hold Clinton guiltless — and He won't hold you or me guiltless either. Christians won't go to Hell for taking God's name in vain. But to commit this sin is to damage your Christian profession and your relationship with God. It is to earn a lower place in Heaven. I'm not sure how much more specifically to put it. But I certainly know that every sin deserves God's wrath and curse, and that He calls this one out as particularly offensive to Himself.

Don't do it, brothers and sisters. Don't take God's name in vain. Don't lift it up to emptiness. Instead, use it in fullness. Mean it when you call Jesus your Lord and Savior. He can forgive your sins, even your sin of taking Him and His name lightly. But your sin was not light to Him; it was heavy. It put Him on a cross and crushed the life out of Him. Only the power of God raised Him from the dead — because it was impossible that death should hold Him. Look to Him, people of God. He is the one who tells you to lift up His name to fullness. Do it. Amen.