

## Commandment 3 – No Vain Talk of God

Exodus 20:1-7 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>Then God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

§

We launched the small sailboat from the pier in a cove on a lake. The wind pushed us towards the lake, but we quickly sensed that the wind was not pushing us forward, but sideways. Quickly the captain diagnosed the problem and shouted to me “put down the centerboard!”

In smaller sailboats, the centerboard is retractable for moving through shallow water and for ease of transport. But the centerboard is an essential part of the boat that enables forward movement. Without it, the boat is pushed by wind and water without direction.

For the Christian, the centerboard is the principles of faith given to us in Scripture. The Ten Commandments would be a part of those faith principles.

Today, we focus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment and three main interpretations of it.

§

Many of us remember the King James Version of this commandment: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord Thy God in vain.” And from it, we understand that we are prohibited from uttering vain oaths and cursings.

“Did you brush your teeth?” “I swear to God I did!”

Or the person who says “GD this” or “GD that”.

One of our members, Rachel Donaldson, told me that her father said that swearing thus revealed a paucity of vocabulary.

Some don't know what to say and so they swear.

Others are lazy and instead of naming frustration, anger or exasperation, they take God's name in vain.

Either way, vain oaths and cursing with God's name suggests the false idea that we can employ God to vouch for us or be our goon and enact our vengeance.

While Scripture does give examples of people speaking under oath required by civil governments, such mindless oaths or cursing is forbidden.

This may be corrected by enacting new habits.

I've told you previously about my friend who says "Oh spit!"

The French say "Zut alors!"

We could also say, I'm angry, outraged, indignant or exasperated

What's at risk is our self-understanding of God and the witness we make to God.

Dr. Ben Lacy Rose spoke of a major in the Army who was a pro at cursing in God's name. And Dr. Rose says by a persistent use of God's name in swearing, a person can slowly lose the capacity to call upon God in a reverent way.

## §

The second major interpretation of this commandment concerns the root meaning of the phrase "in vain" which is empty or meaningless.

Here's an example.

If you asked me about the trees in my yard, I could respond by saying "I have two oaks and two maples".

That would be truthful, but empty.

All four trees are exceptionally tall with the oaks probably being twice the height of my two storey house.

The maples produce brilliantly colored leaves in the fall.

The oaks produce prodigious amounts of acorns.

I've seen birds of all sorts sitting in the oak tree, squirrels galore climb its branches and have roosted in its limbs. And the day that our iguana escaped from the house, she was making a run for that oak tree; we would never have retrieved her.

In the second manner, I've honored, even glorified, the tree.

The Heidelberg shorter catechism, adopted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, begins famously: "The chief end of [humankind] is to glorify God and enjoy God forever." That is one way that we follow the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment.

For months I've received emails from the family of a woman with liver cancer. In her speech and her attitudes she has consistently expressed her trust in God. In that way, she has glorified and honored God in her trial.

She has also written honestly about the challenges of her journey and her specific needs for which she has requested prayers. In that way, it seems, she is enjoying the trust in God and confidence that God will provide for her in this life and in the life to come.

So we abstain from vain oaths and cursing in God's name, and we actively seek to glorify God's name in our words and deeds.

## §

The final interpretation may surprise you. This interpretation has been present throughout Christian history and is given voice by the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 99.

Q. What is required in the third commandment?

A. That we must not profane or abuse the name of God by cursing, by perjury, or by unnecessary oaths. *Nor are we to participate in such horrible sins by keeping quiet and thus giving silent consent....*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added

We can think of the sin of silence related to the Crusades in which thousands of people were massacred in the name of God, or the silence of the churches to inhumane conditions for the poor. Today, I wonder if we're not violating the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment related to the conditions of our prisons where the raping of men and women is apparently permitted as a means of prison order and control.

Many of us break this commandment by our silence to humor that is filled with contempt, or behaviors filled with an angry spirit that poison the spirit of the whole.

Making meaningful use of God's name and honoring God in what we stand for and what we oppose is a challenge in all generations, but included in the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment.

### §

The letter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment is that God expects us to only use the divine name in ways that honor and glorify God.

The spirit of the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment reminds us that speech is not only expressive; it is formative as well. Irreverent language leads to irreverence. Respectful language shapes respect and trust in us and in others.

J. Ellsworth Kalas tells the story of present day Jewish soferim – scribes who copy the Torah – and their respect for the Word of God and the name of God.

They are so infused with the sacredness of their task that they only work with the skin of a kosher animal, prepared according to careful regulations and they use a special formula of ink. Before they begin their daily work they take a purification bath and recite a special prayer. You would think that would cover everything, but when they are about to copy the name of God, they pause for another prayer.

They live each day out of respect and reverence for God.

When we commission our youth today, we will charge them with the New Testament version of the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 3:17