

“The Third Commandment” | Deuteronomy 5:11
Trinity Presbyterian Church | Reverend Steve Johnson

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Please turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 5:11 (page 150). We continue our summer series in the Ten Commandments with the Third Commandment. The Ten Commandments are also written in Exodus 20 and the third commandment is written identically in both places, though that isn't the case for all the commandments, as we will see in a couple weeks with the fourth commandment.

Deuteronomy 5:11 (ESV)

¹¹ “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

Have you ever gone whitewater rafting? Back in college I got to work at camp in Colorado near Pike's Peak called GrandCamps, a unique camp where grandparents bring their grandchildren to camp for a week. One of the activities we did with the grandparents and grandkids was whitewater rafting near Bueno Vista on the Arkansas River. Thankfully for our group the rapids weren't crazy, though someone's glasses were broken. It was beautiful and unforgettable. We were all safe because we stayed in our boats and trusted our guides.

Navigating the Ten Commandments is kind of like whitewater rafting. Each commandment is like a river we're rafting on: it's dangerous, fearful, awesome, beautiful, and powerful. If we put our faith in Jesus, then he's like our raft guide, holding onto us so we don't drown, and guiding us to the end. To stretch the analogy one step further, the river of each commandment has three main sections for us to raft down, and we shouldn't try to portage around any of these three sections or end early before finishing. Otherwise, we'll miss what it all leads into and we'll be stuck in a bad place. So what are those three sections of the river? Guilt, grace, and gratitude. The law first brings us to guilt, then moves us on to grace, and then finishes with gratitude, how we live thankful lives in light of the grace God's shown to us sinners. This model of God's law moving us to guilt, then grace, then gratitude, isn't my invention, but a pattern we see used by the apostle Paul in the books of Romans and Galatians. We need to experience the full ride. If we only let the law show us our sin and guilt, we'll be stuck in a real bad place with no hope of forgiveness. And

if we let the law show us our sin and then show us our need for grace in Jesus, but then we stop there and don't use the law as a guide for our lives, we'll be wandering aimlessly and we'll be bound to fall into all sorts of sinful snares. To mature as Christians, therefore, we need to ride the whole river of the law to guilt, grace, and gratitude. And so today we will follow that pattern as we consider the Third Commandment.

I. Guilt: The Law Shows Us Our Sin

1. What is the third commandment?

First, let's consider our guilt, how the third commandment shows us our sin. Before we consider common ways we break this commandment, let's study what this commandment is teaching.

The first two commandments focus on who to worship and how to worship and now the third commandment continues to build off the theme of worshiping God rightly by directing us in how we are to honor his name. Philip Ryken says that a more literal translation of **"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain"** is "You shall not lift up the name of the Lord your God for nothingness."¹ Ryken goes on to say that this is likely a reference to swearing an oath, possibly swearing by God's name while lifting up one's hand. We aren't to take the name of the Lord in "vain," a word which can also be translated as "nothingness," "worthlessness," "emptiness," or "falseness." Swearing by God's name should have great significance and truth and meaning, and so God's name must not be treated in any other way.

2. What is required?

So what does the third commandment require of us? It requires that we know and honor the name of the LORD in everything we say and do. So what is meant by **"the name of the LORD"**? The first two commandments were spoken by God in the first person, and now starting in the third commandment he shifts to speak of himself in the third person for the rest of the commandments. He likely did this to emphasize his covenant name Yahweh, the name that God revealed to Moses and to Israel. The meaning of the name *Yahweh* is

¹ Ryken, Philip. "Exodus: Saved for God's Glory." 2015, p. 539.

profound: it likely means “I am who I am,” speaking of God’s uncreated nature, his eternity, and his sovereignty. The “I am” is the Creator of everything who himself was never created. He always has been and always will be. And so God chose to share his name to Moses and his people as a mark of their covenant relationship with him. *We* name our children, our pets, our businesses, our cities, our lands, and sometimes our cars but we do not name our God. He has revealed his name to us, and this is very important because God’s names throughout the Bible communicate his character and his works to us. We don’t name God and decide his character, like an imaginary friend. And so we must know and honor God’s covenant name and all of his other names. Here are some more of his names:

- God is Adonai, our Lord and master (Gen. 15:2).
- He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev. 1:8).
- He is the Ancient of Days, the God of eternity past (Dan. 7:9).
- He is El Elyon, God Most High (Gen. 14:20).
- He is El Roi, the God who sees all and knows the needs of his people (Gen. 16:13).
- He is El Shaddai, God Almighty (Gen. 17:1).
- He is Yahweh Sabaoth, the LORD of hosts or the LORD of the angel armies (Is. 6:3).
- He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Jesus’ name means “The LORD saves” and Christ means “Anointed One.” Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us” (Isa. 7:14). He is the Word, the Logos, the perfect self-disclosure of God through whom all things were created (John 1:1).

These are the most common biblical names for God and they tell us so much about his character, his being, his heart, and his power and love toward us.

God’s name represents his character, his works, and his words, and so the third commandment requires us to not only speak honorably of his titles, but also all of his works and his words in the Bible. The honoring of God’s name, works and word is of utmost priority for Christians, which is why the very first petition in the Lord’s Prayer is “**Hallowed by thy name**” (Matt. 6:9). And so everything we do as Christians in our worship should be done in the name of the Lord. We gather in his name, we baptize in his name, we pray in his name, we preach in his name, and we take the Lord’s Supper in his name. Not

only are we to honor God in our corporate worship, but in every aspect of our lives in private or public. We are to display the glory and holiness of God to all those around us, whether at home or at school or at the grocery store or at the office, wherever we are. This is the high and holy requirement of the third commandment.

3. What is forbidden?

So what is forbidden in this commandment? When I was a kid, I thought the third commandment only meant not saying OMG. But it's so much more than that. Incidentally, the phrase "O my God" is a wonderful, biblical phrase, a phrase that occurs 22 times in psalms and prayers, like in the prayer of Daniel that we just prayed in our confession of sin. It's a beautiful phrase that speaks to God as our personal God and a God to whom we as individuals can speak to and be heard and cared for. We should pray it more often without any fear that we're taking the LORD's name in vain. Our culture, on the other hand, has taken that precious phrase and treated it like it was common, like it's a throw-away phrase, a mere exclamation point, and even a joke. That kind of use of God's name is forbidden. It does not display the infinite worth of God, but makes him seem trivial and trite in the hearts of men.

The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q: 113)² gives a very long list of what is forbidden in the third commandment, and I won't read it all, but here are some other sins forbidden by the third commandment: blasphemy, perjury, sinful cursings, swearing an oath to do something you shouldn't do, breaking an oath or vow, misinterpreting and misapplying God's word, using God's word to stir up quarrels about things that don't matter, false teachings and false prophecies, living hypocritically of the faith you profess, being ashamed of God's word, and backsliding in our obedience to God's word. Much more could be said but it isn't worth our time to create a comprehensive list, because mankind

² WLC Q. 113. What are the sins forbidden in the third commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the third commandment are, the not using of God's name as is required; and the abuse of it in an ignorant, vain, irreverent, profane, superstitious, or wicked mentioning or otherwise using his titles, attributes, ordinances, or works, by blasphemy, perjury; all sinful cursings, oaths, vows, and lots; violating of our oaths and vows, if lawful; and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful; murmuring and quarreling at, curious prying into, and misapplying of God's decrees and providences; misinterpreting, misapplying, or any way perverting the Word, or any part of it, to profane jests, curious or unprofitable questions, vain janglings, or the maintaining of false doctrines; abusing it, the creatures, or any thing contained under the name of God, to charms, or sinful lusts and practices; the maligning, scorning, reviling, or any wise opposing of God's truth, grace, and ways; making profession of religion in hypocrisy, or for sinister ends; being ashamed of it, or a shame to it, by unconformable, unwise, unfruitful and offensive walking, or backsliding from it.

keeps inventing new ways to sin, but I hope that gives us some general categories of what's forbidden in the Third Commandment.

4. What is the penalty?

Now what is the penalty for breaking this commandment? The last sentence of it says, **“for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”** Only the second and third commandments speak of God's judgment for those who disobey, and here it does not say what the punishment will be, but simply that God will not overlook those who break this commandment. At the judgment they will not be innocent. They will be guilty. Here we see how one of the main purposes of the law is to show us our guilt and to warn us of God's judgment.

5. What are common ways we've broken it?

So what are some common ways we've broken the third commandment? Sadly, hypocrisy is very common. We have God's name on us, we've been baptized in his name, and yet we, in front of our spouses, in front of our children, in front of our friends and coworkers, we say and do things that damage God's reputation. Hypocrisy is very common. I think it's also probably more common than we'd like to admit that we use God's name or Jesus' name disrespectfully. We sarcastically say “Praise the Lord” or we use God's name as an exclamation point. God's name is far more valuable than that. I think it's also common for us to misapply and misinterpret God's word, not taking the time to study how to interpret the Bible, neglecting to read a verse in its context, and instead making a verse say what we want it to say. It does not honor God to turn his word into our word. Corporate worship is also a time when we break this command. When we think worship is boring and should be shorter or more entertaining. When we come as a spectator instead of a participant. When we let our minds wander. When we check out during the Lord's Supper. Sometimes we sing God's name with our lips, but our hearts do not resonate with his praise. These sins are all common to us all.

Another common way we break this commandment is by supporting businesses and artists and musicians who use God's name and his word to get our money. In our Christianized culture, there's a lot of money to be made in selling Christian stuff to people. I

look back at all the Christian bands I used to listen to back in the 90s and early 2000s and so many of them have members who have left the faith or it's come out that they weren't living for Jesus at all when they were in their heyday. When I was in Cameroon, Africa on a missions trip, there were taxi cabs with mudflaps that said "King of kings" and "Lord of lords," probably to reflect Christian values in order to attract business. That's a very literal way of dragging God's name through the mud for personal profit. And I think it's very common for us to blindly follow whatever politicians use God's name or quote Bible verses. Politicians have been using God's name to advance their agendas for thousands of years. We need to be discerning. During the civil war, preachers and politicians from both sides used Scripture to try to justify that God was on their side and not the other.³ Michael Horton also notes that around WWII, "In Germany, the evangelical church became the 'Reich's Church,' the state church of Naziism, and all but a group of Lutheran and Reformed clergymen who insisted that Nazi ideology was heretical signed the oath of allegiance to Hitler."⁴ Today, evangelical Christians are a large voter demographic and so politicians will try to speak our language and name-drop God and Jesus to earn our trust and our vote. We must be discerning of when a politician's faith is real and when it's ploy for political power.

II. Grace: The Law Points Us to Jesus

1. Jesus' atonement for our guilt

I don't know about you, but meditating on the Third Commandment has been uncomfortable for me and shown me how much sin is in my heart. But that discomfort is a good thing. Just as we want a doctor to find the disease, so also we want God to show us our sin so that a cure might be sought quickly. Thankfully the law shows us not only our guilt, but also our need for grace, for a Savior.

The third commandment points us to Jesus, the holy Son of God who put on our common flesh. He was born to a common family, called by a common name, and lived a lowly life while being treated like a mere man, not having the honor that his name

³ For many examples, see "A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War" by James P. Byrd.

⁴ Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom: Relating to God and Others through the Ten Commandments* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993), 100.

deserved. Jesus is the perfect image of God, the Word of God, and he perfectly communicated to us the name of God through his words and actions. Jesus called himself the “I AM” (John 8:58, 18:5-6), which would have been blasphemy had it not been true. And this God-man, the one deserving of all honor, he, for our sake, died a shameful death on the cross, so that our sins might be forgiven and we would be counted guiltless before God. Because we’re forgiven in Christ, we get the high privilege of being called by his name, something we clearly don’t deserve as those who have taken the Lord’s name in vain. We are given the name *Christian* as a gift – that’s grace.

2. Jesus’ righteousness for our righteousness

Not only does the law point us to our need for Jesus’ atonement for our guilt, but also to our need for his righteousness. Jesus perfectly obeyed the law. He never once broke the third commandment. He was never a hypocrite, but consistently loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loved his neighbor to the greatest extent. He was righteous. And at the cross, God graciously made the great exchange – he exchanged our sin for Christ’s righteousness. Christ took our sin upon himself and he then covered us with his righteousness. So when God sees us, he sees us in Christ, clothed in Christ’s righteousness, and he views us as if we had always obeyed not only the third commandment, but all the commandments perfectly. That’s grace.

3. Jesus’ Spirit for our obedience

And not only does the law point us to our need for Jesus’ righteousness, but also to our need for his Spirit for our obedience. Romans 7:6 says, “**6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.**” God knew that to obey him we needed something far greater than words on a tablet of stone. We needed new hearts made alive by and filled with his very Spirit so that we might know him and love to be faithful to him and him alone. You can rest assured that Jesus has promised his Holy Spirit to all who put their faith in him. And when you have the Spirit of God in your heart, you notice a growing love for obedience to God and a growing love for his honor. *In Jesus we find all that the law showed us we needed but couldn’t provide.* In Jesus we are guiltless

before God at his judgment. In Jesus we have a righteous standing before God. In Jesus we have his Spirit in us so that we can obey God's law willingly.

III. Gratitude: The Law Guides Our Lives

In our rafting trip down the river of the third commandment, we now come to the third and last section: gratitude. After the law has shown us our guilt and our need for grace, it then shows itself to be a useful guide for the rest of our lives. We often think of the law as something that's a burden to us, something that restrains our freedom. But the Bible speaks much differently about the Christian's relationship to God's commands. 1 John 5:3 says this, **"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."** Before Christ, the law was a yoke too heavy for us to bear, but now that we are in Christ and we have his light yoke upon us, we love to keep his commandments because we love our relationship with God. We love being like him. Here's a great quote by Richard Sibbes in his book The Bruised Reed that speaks to this freedom in Christ:

"Thus the desperate madness of men is laid open, that they would rather be under the guidance of their own lusts, and in consequence of Satan himself, to their endless destruction, than put their feet into Christ's fetters and their necks under his yoke; though, indeed, **Christ's service is the only true liberty. His yoke is an easy yoke, his burden but as the burden of wings to a bird which make her fly the higher.**" God's yoke is like the "burden" of wings to a bird which makes it fly. God's law is a guide for us for how we as Christians can fly, how we can live holy lives of love to God and neighbor. *And that life of holy love is true liberty.*

1. Application: how the third commandment guides our lives today

Just as the Apostle Paul circled back to the law to guide the Christian life at the end of Romans and Galatians, let's circle back to the third commandment and ask how it can guide our lives today. How can the third commandment free us to love God and others by the power of the Spirit? Here are a few applications and may God's Spirit open your eyes to many others.

- First, since it's Father's Day, let me start with an application to fathers. Fathers, you have made a vow to your wife and to the Lord to be faithful to her, so keep it, be faithful to her and honor the Lord with your marriage. Your marriage is to reflect Christ and the church, so make it a daily priority to honor the Lord with your marriage. Strive for sexual purity and connect with other brothers to help you with that. We have different kinds of men's cohorts and groups that could be a helpful context for you to have accountability, to be challenged, to be reminded of the gospel, and to pray for God's help. Talk to Chris or myself if it's time to get connected.
- And fathers, even though we don't make a vow to our children when they're born, we have a God-given responsibility to love them, lead them, provide for them, protect them, and teach them in a way that is just as weighty before God as if we had taken a vow. We reflect the name and character of God to our children. Many children see God in a similar way that they see their earthly fathers. That can be discouraging, especially when we don't measure up as dads, but that can be remedied through humility. Humbly apologize to your children when you don't reflect God well to them. Be open to them about your need for forgiveness and for God's Spirit to help you grow. Echoing the words of John the Baptist, in your parenting, you must decrease and Christ must increase (John 3:30).
- Now to everyone, to men, women, and children: we represent Christ to everyone in every context we live in. We don't just live as Christians at church and at home and then live as anonymous Americans in our jobs and hobbies and at school. When you're shopping, you represent Christ. When you're posting on the internet, you represent Christ. When you're at a medical appointment, you represent Christ. When you're with friends and family, you represent Christ. When you're chatting with your next-door neighbors, you represent Christ. When you engage politically, you represent Christ more than any party or platform. You display the name and reputation of the Lord God wherever you go. Let's make God look glorious in Rochester.

- And when we come to worship, do your best to regularly come on time, to prepare your hearts the night before or the morning of to hear from the living God. The purpose of our existence is to worship God genuinely, so take some time to prayerfully focus so your hearts and minds and bodies are ready to worship. This certainly can be challenging when you have health issues or little ones, so be patient with them and with yourselves as you grow as a family in worshiping God. Don't complain that your kids are holding you back - you are a family and you patiently grow together. And as you listen to God's word being preached, receive it as God's word rather than merely a lecture by us pastors. Pastor Chris and I are nobodies, but the God of the Bible is the one true and living God, the I Am, El Shaddai and Yahweh Sabaoth, and so we must be attentive each week to hear the most important words one could ever hear in a lifetime. And when it's time for the Lord's Supper, think on the promises of God to you in the gospel. Engage your faith in Christ during that holy meal, for it is by faith that we feast on Christ and receive all his benefits. For some of you, you believe in the Lord Jesus, but you haven't yet come to the table. Honor God's name by becoming a communicant member and joining us at this table – Pastor Chris and I would love to help you take that next step. Before we transition to the table, let's now pray and ask for God's blessing on us to live out the third commandment in light of the grace we've been given.