

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:7

To understand more about the third commandment and its implications for us today.

Names Are Important

In 2018, Rosalind Picard, an MIT professor, helped invent a simple life-saving device that can be used by people with epilepsy. It looks like a smart watch, and it is sold under the name *Embrace*. Epileptic seizures take 3,000 lives per year in the United States, and most epileptic seizures pose a risk of asphyxiation. This can, of course, be prevented if somebody nearby ensures that the person's airway remain open and the person is resting safely. However, some seizures are so deep that the person's body can completely shut down for lack of signals from the brain. In instances such as these, there is one noninvasive intervention that works far better than any other, that can interrupt the misfiring neurons and establish normal brain function within a few minutes. Another person needs to speak to you and gently touch you, *ideally calling you by name*. Names are powerful. They establish relationships. In some cultures, to know a person's name is to have some kind of power over them. In other cultures, naming a person gives you authority over them. For example, parents name their children. Kings name cities they conquer. It is curious, then, that God names Himself. Why? Because no one has authority over Him. He is the highest Being there is. And yet He gives us His name. We should, therefore, use it carefully. And that is the thrust of the third commandment.

Read the Text:

"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. (Exodus 20:7, ESV)

Study the Text:

The Lord's Name and the Way We Use It

There are a number of varying opinions on how Christians ought to understand the third commandment. Some will argue that this is a command that prohibits using the word "God" in any circumstances that are not worshipful. Others will argue that this is only with reference to the actual *name* of God, the LORD (YHWH). As has been clear so far, while the Ten Commandments are of tremendous importance, they are a bit vague and thus require some deeper thought to rightly interpret them. Below are some considerations for this importance commandment.

WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM

We have benefitted by looking at the Westminster Larger Catechism each week and will therefore continue to do so this week as well. Question 112 asks: "What is required in the third commandment?" The answer is as follows: "The third commandment requires, that the name of God, his titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, his works, and whatsoever else there is whereby he makes himself known, be holily and reverently used in thought, meditation, word, and writing; by an holy profession, and answerable conversation, to the glory of God, and the good of ourselves, and others." You'll notice the WLC

does not restrict the third commandment to merely the proper name of God, but to “his titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, his works,” and any other means by which He has made Himself known.

Just as is the case in the first and second commandments, it also asks the question concerning what is forbidden in the third commandment: “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.” There is also attention paid to the ways in which we fulfill lawful and unlawful vows, and defines profaning the word in part as asking “curious or unprofitable questions” of it. The idea here is not to snuff out honest curiosity, but to avoid “foolish controversies” as Titus 3:9 and 2 Timothy 2:23 warn against. The portion on oaths and vows is also interesting, as it calls to mind Jesus’ warning against this in Matthew 5:33-37 and 23:16-22. John Frame concludes, “because God has created all things and remains sovereign over them, to swear by anything is to swear by him.”¹ Why, however, does the WLC include such a broad understanding of the third commandment? Much of this has to do with the verb in play. The third commandment does not say, “Do not *speak or say* the Lord’s name in vain,” but rather, “Do not **take** the Lord’s name in vain.” But what does that mean?

TAKING THE LORD’S NAME

Douglas Stuart argues that the primary meaning of this verb “would appear to be invoking his name as guarantor of one’s words.”² Again, this seems to correspond to the idea of oath taking and vows that Jesus spoke against. Frame, however, concludes, that “the commandment is not only about speaking God’s name, but, more broadly, bearing it.”³ As image bearers of God, then, the Westminster Divines believed that anything that was done sinfully, carelessly, or otherwise was a violation of the third commandment because it was being done by an image-bearer.

NOT A TOTAL PROHIBITION

The third commandment does not totally prohibit the use of God’s name. There are times when we are explicitly told to confess the name of God in acts of prayer and worship (Gen. 16:13; Ps. 20:7-8, 61:8). Jesus, in modeling the so-called Lord’s Prayer, begins by praying: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name” (Matt. 6:9). The Proverbs confess: “The name of the LORD is a strong tower” (Prov. 18:10). The Psalmist declares: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Ps. 8:1). To use the name of God in acts of worship and prayer and in evangelism are not only permissible, but a requirement. The LORD is the one who saves, and how will people be saved by Him whom they do not know (Rom. 10:14-15)?

SUBSTITUTES

What about substitute words? Some will argue that saying, “gosh,” or “gee” is to the same degree of infraction as using God’s actual name. Others argue that it is permissible since a conscious effort has been made to express frustration in a manner that avoids using God’s name. This brings up the broader discussion about whether or not it is the words themselves that are the issue, or the heart behind them. My position is that the heart is the issue in play, and therefore there are times when substitute words might serve as a sufficient option in avoiding breaking the third commandment. However, consider Ephesians 4:29: “Let no

¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 493.

² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 455.

³ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 494.

corrupting talking come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” This verse balances our understanding of the third commandment well. For example, there are times when Scripture itself records blasphemous statements (Ps. 14:1; Matt. 12:24; 1 Cor. 12:13). These statements, are themselves, violations of the third commandment in form, but in meaning they are meant for the building of up of the people of God as warnings against what not to do or say. They are not uttered (or in this case, written) as volatile expressions, but they are actually instructive unto holiness.

The third commandment isn’t necessarily concerned with the words themselves. Words are, after all, *arbitrary signs*. For example, the word “gift” means “a present” in English, but in German it means “poison.” The word “rat” in English means “a rodent,” but in German it means, “advice or council.” Words are simply arbitrary signs that convey meaning agreed upon by the language community. That means that words have intent behind them. We use specific words that mean specific things as defined by only our language (and crucially, not any other language). So, it isn’t that the third commandment is concerned with the words themselves, but rather the intention in the heart of the speaker. That is the essence of all of the ten commandments, as a matter of fact. The first commandment doesn’t simply mean “swearing off” other gods, but rather living your life oriented towards only the one, true God. The second commandment doesn’t simply mean throwing away all of your wooden idols, but also your affections and dependence on them in your heart. Some who limit the speech only have done nothing effective to avoid breaking the third commandment; they’ve simply made it a private sin instead of a public one by limiting those things to their minds. Holiness does entail a change in your actions, but it doesn’t begin with changing your actions. It begins with a change in your heart.

What About Now?

One thing that the third commandment should make you consider is both your speech and actions as an image-bearer of God. We often don’t take issues of holiness seriously, and that is a grave mistake. We don’t want to be legalistic and limit the form of words without missing the importance of the heart. On the other hand, we shouldn’t grant license for any kind of crude language or actions as long as it has no real harmful intent. There is a balance of maintaining a life that obeys Ephesians 4:29, but also isn’t overly stringent on the letter of the law while missing the heart of the law.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:7. What does this command require of us?

2. Read Exodus 20:7. What does this command prohibit us from doing?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 5:33-37. What does this passage teach about vows?

- 2. Read Proverbs 18:10. What does this passage indicate about the LORD’s name?

Day Three

- 1. Read Psalm 8:1. How is the LORD’s name described in this verse? Who will be impacted by it?

- 2. Why is the third commandment important?

Day Four

- 1. Read Ephesians 4:29. What does “corrupting talk” entail? What does it not entail?

- 2. Are these passages more aimed at the words we use, or the heart behind them?

Discuss the Text!

Week 50 Discussion: A Good Witness

One thing that the third commandment reminds us of is the importance of maintaining a good or holy witness towards nonbelievers. Talk as a group about the ways you are a solid witness, and also about the ways in which you fail, and what you need to do to grow in those areas.

- 1. Icebreaker: What does it mean to be a good witness for Jesus Christ?
- 2. How does your speech impact your witness towards nonbelievers?
- 3. How do your actions impact your witness towards nonbelievers?
- 4. Does Christian conduct really matter? Why or why not?
- 5. Do you receive correction well when others correct you?
- 6. Are you better at keeping the third commandment today than you were 2-4 years ago? Explain.
- 7. Kid Talk (For Home): How do our words reflect our love for Jesus when we disagree with others?

Takeaways:

- 1. The third commandment is a prohibition against “taking” the Lord’s name in vain.
- 2. This can include both words and actions as image-bearers of God.
- 3. This command is oriented towards the heart, not the form of a word itself.