

The Third Commandment (1997)

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It is not difficult for me to decide what the most common sin is: idolatry. Five of the Ten Commandments—numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 and 10—bear directly on it. Additionally, we can easily include the others within idolatry by seeing them in their spiritual application. Though idolatry is a major source of mankind's problems, only a few think of it this way because the more obvious and immediately painful sins blind them to its provocative presence.

The first commandment deals with **what we worship**, the unique Creator, the Source of everything. We must give to Him our supreme loyalty. The second commandment covers **the way we worship**. God forbids us to devise representations of Him, nor should we substitute modes of worship by blending God's way with forms of worship drawn from this world, like Christmas and Easter.

This article will focus on a commandment that many do not generally understand. In fact, most of us understand it only in its most obvious application, and thus we may unwittingly break it frequently. The third commandment regulates **the quality of our worship**. It involves glorifying God in every aspect of life.

God Has No Equal

Most people regard the third commandment very lightly. The Jews, however, have a saying: "When God gave the third commandment, the whole world trembled." They even warned witnesses at a trial with this statement. Why? The Jews believe that because it reads, "the LORD will not hold him guiltless," there is no forgiveness for transgressing it! If it is this important, perhaps we should pay closer attention to it!

God asks, "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? . . . To whom then will you liken Me, or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:18, 25). Obviously, the second commandment expressly forbids making any representation of Him. God is unique; nothing can compare with Him. We are without a point of contact or physical reference to make any comparison.

This ought to show us the absolute folly of making images: On its face, every image is a lie. But should we not try to understand, to learn, what God is like? God does not want us concerned with what He looks like because it emphasizes the wrong area. He supplies us with enough information to know that He generally looks like a man. To Him, that is enough!

But He does want us to know what **He** is. He wants us to know **Him**. The entire Bible reveals His mind, character, attributes, offices, power, will, promises, plan and relationship with us. The third commandment concerns this kind of knowledge and how well we apply it in our lives.

This commandment appears in Exodus 20:7: "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." This commandment

requires serious reflection. Like the second, it includes a warning that God will not hold us guiltless. It seems that sometimes God deliberately understates things for subtle emphasis and to ultimately magnify the meaning.

To understand this commandment better, we need to explain four words:

***Take**, throughout the Old Testament, is translated into English from seventy-four different Hebrew words. This one means "to lift up," "bear," "carry," "use" and "appropriate."*

***Vain** has the sense of "desolating"; "that which lacks reality, purpose, value or truth." It may also be translated "lying," "false," "worthless," "profane," "foolish," "reproachful," "curse," "blaspheme" or "useless."*

***Guiltless** means "free," "clear," "innocent," "clean," "blameless," "unpunished."*

***Name** means "a mark or sign standing out"; "a word by which a person, place or thing is distinctively known." Its Hebrew root denotes "high," "elevated," "a monument." It indicates majesty or excellence. A name identifies, signifies, and specifies.*

This commandment has nothing to do with the proper pronunciation of God's name, which no one knows anyway since it was lost in antiquity. It has nothing to do with superstition or magical uses of a name. Its application is far broader.

"Name" in the Bible

In biblical thought, a name does not merely identify; it expresses the essential nature of its bearer. In all probability, Adam named the beasts by observing their natures, as he had nothing else on which to base his judgments. From this arises a principle about how the Bible uses the term "name." To know God's name is to know God as He has revealed Himself, that is, to understand His nature.

Notice Esau's understanding of this principle in regard to Jacob, "Supplanter": "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!" (Genesis 27:36). When Abigail pleads for Nabal ("Fool") before David, this principle again comes to the fore: "Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him" (I Samuel 25:25). The Bible shows a name exercises constraint upon a person to conform to it.

In Hebrew thought, names are inextricably bound to existence; nothing exists unless it has a name. The very essence of a thing is concentrated in its name. Hence, creation was not complete until Adam had named all the creatures. To cut off a person's name is to end his existence.

Connect this idea to Revelation 3:12, where those who overcome will receive the names of God; the city of God, New Jerusalem; and the Revelator, Jesus Christ. These names will designate their very existence, nature, and responsibility in God's Kingdom. A change of name frequently signals a change of position or character, as with Jacob to Israel and Saul to Paul.

Similarly, to speak or act in another's name is to act as his representative and to participate in his authority. When we pray "in the name of Jesus Christ," we ask on His authority, not ours, because He has given us permission to do so. To be called by another's name implies ownership by that person.

One bearing another person's name comes under his authority and protection. Sons of God, baptized into the name of God (Matthew 28:19), are in this position.

Against More Than Euphemisms

The third commandment is certainly against common swearing, including using euphemisms so common in society. Many commonly use "gee," "gosh," "golly," "got all muddy," "cheese and rice," "Jiminy Cricket," and "doggone" to substitute for the more offensive words some carelessly spew forth. This commandment also covers the light or disrespectful use of any of God's attributes or character.

All the Divine Names and Titles in the Bible, by Herbert Lockyer, lists 364 names and titles just for Jesus Christ. Through His names and titles, God has chosen to reveal His attributes, office, authority, prerogatives and will. Each name of God features some distinct virtue or characteristic of His nature. Thus, God has declared the glory of His nature by His names, which are not to be abused.

It is this commandment more than any other that shows how much God should be a part of our every word, deed and attitude. It shows that the test of our spiritual cleanliness is how we use the name of God, whether in truth or vanity. It indicates that a man is better off being sincerely wrong than to be a professing Christian and deny His name by the conduct of his life.

To help us know David, the Bible shows him as a shepherd, warrior, king, prophet, poet, musician and sinner, each a part of a rich nature. God is manifold times greater, yet He reveals Himself, His nature, just as the Bible reveals David. We see God in a multitude of circumstances, revealing what He is by the way He acts and reacts. He also names Himself what the circumstances reveal of Him, so whenever we see that name, it also brings to mind an aspect of His nature. Thus, He gives us a double-barreled revelation of Himself.

Names of God

One of God's names is "Creator." David writes:

O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth, You who set Your glory above the heavens! Out of the mouth of babes and infants You have ordained strength, because of Your enemies, that You may silence the enemy and the avenger. When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? (Psalm 8:1-4)

Other translations use words like "glorious," "majestic" and "to be admired" rather than "excellent" to express the feelings generated by meditating on how God is revealed by the heavens He created! The starry heavens stretched before David showcase the awesome and spectacular majesty of God.

Commenting on verse 1, the *Soncino Commentary* says that God's majesty is "rehearsed above the heavens." *Rehearse* can mean "to repeat" or "tell in detail." David tells us that God has invested the heavens with awesome splendor to direct man's mind to ponder the Creator's existence, majesty and excellence. This thought also implies that He is just as majestic in demonstrating Himself on earth as He is in the heavens. What excellence do we see in earth and heaven? Power, order, beauty, loving providence, wisdom, reason, logic and vastness of thinking.

David intended this psalm to direct our thinking toward God's greatness and puny man's insignificance. However, that awesome, majestic, glorious God is glorifying Himself in man! He has chosen what the world considers weak and foolish—us—to appreciate and respect His glory, His name.

In verse 1 God uses two names for Himself: "LORD" is *YHWH*, the self-existent One, the Eternal, the name God frequently uses when He is emphasizing His covenant relationship with us. "Lord" is *Adonim*, a plural title indicating ownership—in this case He owns the entire creation!

Both of these names are at times combined with other words to form even more specific descriptions of Him. The name most frequently combined and recognized is *YHWH*. Here is a short list of some of them:

YHWH-Jireh—God our Provider—Genesis 22:14.
YHWH-Mekaddishkem—God who sanctifies—Exodus 31:13.
YHWH-Nissi—God is my banner—Exodus 17:15.
YHWH-Roi—God our shepherd—Psalm 23:1.
YHWH-Ropheka—God our healer—Exodus 15:26.
YHWH-Shalom—God our peace—Judges 6:24.
YHWH-Shammah—God is present—Ezekiel 48:35.
YHWH-Zidkenu—God our righteousness—Jeremiah 23:6.

Psalm 23—which more people claim as their favorite portion of Scripture than any other—is a brief expounding of these eight names of God! Though the names do not actually appear in the verses, the implication of how God serves us is. Verse 1 shows God's guidance (*Roi*) and providence (*Jireh*). Verse 2 speaks of Him giving us peace (*Shalom*), and verse 3, of Him restoring us (*Ropheka*) and leading us to righteousness (*Zidkenu*). Verse 4 reminds us how God is with us (*Shammah*). Finally in verse 5, He encourages (*Nissi*) and anoints or sanctifies us (*Mekaddishkem*).

Names Reveal What God Does

Psalm 18, another psalm written by David, expresses his understanding that God's names and titles describe His character, attributes and services to us. It begins, "I will [fervently] love You, O LORD," then a torrent of names follow, revealing how David perceived the many ways God functioned in his life: as the Strength of his life, its Foundation and Security, the Source of every good and perfect gift, his Defender and Captain of his salvation in whom he trusted.

Accordingly, when we have a need in our lives, do we not seek out those who have a title (auto mechanic, plumber, seamstress) and a name (reputation) to meet it? When we need a carpenter, we do not solicit a dentist. Likewise, we must seek God when we need help in areas that He has shown His power, wisdom, skill and willingness to help. How can we do this, though, if we do not know what He can do? We must find out!

Exodus 33:9-23 tells of a time of discouragement and doubt in Moses' life following the Golden Calf incident. Moses asks God for reassurance by allowing him to see God's glory (verse 18).

Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and *I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you*. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." (verses 19-20)

We cannot be sure what Moses had in mind when he asked to see God's glory. He probably wanted to see God's glorious and radiant brilliance and form. God obliged to some degree, but He gave Moses something more than he expected—in fact, something totally *unexpected*. As He passed by him, He preached a sermon on His name, the third commandment!

Then the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation." So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. (Exodus 34:5-8)

God expounds 11 attributes: *YHWH*, *El*, the Merciful One, the Gracious One, the Longsuffering One, the Mighty One, the Kind and Loving One, the True One, the One who Preserves Kindness, the Forgiving One and the Chastising One.

God gives Moses, not so much a vision of His power and majesty, but of His love, of how He relates to His creation. The real glory of God is His character, His nature, especially toward His children. His names are signposts of His nature, reminders of what we can expect Him to do as we live by faith.

Another Revelation of God

Normally, we cannot see God, or be as close to Him as Moses was, so we are cut off from a more direct revelation of Him. Additionally, what we know has come from Scriptures originally written in Hebrew and translated, often vaguely, into English. This can leave us groping for understanding. God, however, has supplied another, clearer revelation, so we are not one whit behind those who understand Hebrew.

At that time, Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." (Matthew 11:25-27)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:14, 18)

Finally, John 14:6-10 makes this revelation abundantly clear:

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him." Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."

Moses asked to see the visible glory of God, and He proclaimed His name verbally. Jesus is saying, "If you want to see the mind and nature of God, if you want to see His attitudes, look at Me." God reveals Himself and declares His glory to us through the life, works and words of Jesus of Nazareth as He opens our minds by His Holy Spirit.

Jesus is "the way" because of all mankind, only He, unmarred by sin, has intimate knowledge of God. Knowing God depends on our knowledge of the truth about Jesus. He shows the way we must walk, the direction and manner of living and relating to others. This is precisely the knowledge Jesus gives. Many times when we ask directions in a strange city, the response confuses us because we are unfamiliar with the town. But when we ask directions of Jesus, He says, "Come, follow Me, and I will take you there."

Some people may teach truth, but He embodies truth; He is "the truth." A man may teach geometry, and his character may not affect his teaching. But if one teaches moral truth, character is paramount. Keeping the third commandment properly revolves around knowing the truth about God and His way.

Colossians 1:15 and 2:9 are among the strongest statements in the Bible about the divine nature of Jesus: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. . . . For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." He not only is equal to and reflects God, but He also reveals God to us because He is God. He is completely holy and has authority to judge the world.

We can have no clearer view of God than by looking at Christ. He is the full revelation of God to man. He is the complete expression of God in a human body. He is unique: God became a man, imposing upon Himself the same time-space limitations as other men.

He had every opportunity to waste time, get sick, eat gluttonously and become overweight, drink and experience a hangover, "fly off the handle" in anger, or attack others when someone pricked His vanity. He could have become bitter from rejection or depressed when things did not go His way. He could have worked or played with intense competitiveness to "win at all costs." He had to face death, His own as well as of loved ones. He could have felt "the deck was stacked" against Him.

The gospels show God coping with life on the same terms as men. Now we can really see what kind of character God possesses. Jesus' life gives us firsthand knowledge of what the true way of life is, allowing us to cooperate with Him in His purpose. Among many other things, we see God teaching, healing, sacrificing His life, correcting in love, guarding His flock and patiently counseling.

Eternal Life

Jesus' prayer on the eve of His crucifixion gives us important insight into this:

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. . . . I have manifested **Your name** to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. . . . Holy Father, keep through **Your name** those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. . . . And I have declared to them **Your name** , and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:3, 6, 11, 26)

He refers to God's name three times in this brief and exceedingly important prayer! The name represents what He spent His ministry revealing to us about God. He keeps us through His name both by our trusting in what it means and our obedience to how it shows we should live.

He defines *eternal life* as "to know God." "Know" suggests a very close intimacy, just as a husband and wife are intimate in marriage (Genesis 4:1). It indicates experiential knowledge, not theoretical. In Amos 5:4 God exclaims, "Seek Me and live!" He is saying, "Turn to Me and My way of life; seek to know Me," not "Search for Me," because He has already revealed Himself to us. He is saying, "Seek to know Me by living the same way I do." That is how experiential knowledge of Him becomes an intimate knowing of Him. He will walk with such people (Amos 3:3).

Aionis , the word translated "eternal," deals less with duration of life (although it is included), than it does with **quality** of life. Living endlessly is not necessarily good. Would anyone want to live forever with a demon's quality of life? True eternal life is the life of God. To possess it means experiencing now some of its splendor because it is being lived and producing its glorious fruits.

Psalms 9:10 adds, "And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You." Those living by faith do not trust in what He is called, for that would be mere superstition. Their faith is in **what He is** , His character and nature, which they have experienced by seeking to live His way.

Bearing God's Name

Considering the great emphasis the Bible puts on God's name, Matthew 28:19-20 has wondrous yet sobering ramifications for us:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them **in the name** of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

The word "in" is better translated "into." At baptism, we are immersed into the name of the Father. We now bear that name and all it implies! As sons of God, we bear our Father's name. "God" is our spiritual family name!

Are we living up to it? Are we "walking" as God would walk were He living our lives so we do not tarnish the reputation of His name? The third commandment concerns the quality of our personal witness in everything that name we bear represents, as it applies to a human.

Solomon writes, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold" (Proverbs 22:1). A good name can be a person's most valuable asset. How many times does God give "for My name's sake" as the reason He acts? He was simply preserving his reputation as God! Agur the son of Jakeh later adds:

Two things I request of You (deprive me not before I die): Remove falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food You prescribe for me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, "Who is the LORD?" Or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God." (Proverbs 30:7-9)

Isaiah 43:6-7, 10-12 gives a very interesting insight into our responsibility regarding God's name:

"I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not keep them back!' Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him. . . . You are My witnesses," says the LORD, "and My servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no savior. I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, and there was no foreign god among you; therefore you are My witnesses," says the LORD, "that I am God."

We who bear the name of God are witnesses that our God is God. What do our lives declare about God? If we who bear His name fail to live up to that name's reputation, we break the third commandment and profane the name of God. We hallow or profane God's name by our conduct, no matter what member of our body errs. This commandment tests the quality of our witness. It changes hypocrisy from merely "bearing false witness" to idolatry for which *God* holds the offender guilty, for He sees what men may miss in judgment.

No Need to Chase After a Name

Many people spend their lives chasing after a name that will bring them honor or notoriety. They want people to associate them with a "name" university, a "name" team or a "name" company. They want to wear clothing with a "name" on its label, drive a "name" car or marry into a "name" family. But the greatest name that anyone can possibly bear has come to us unbidden. John writes, "Beloved, **now** we are children of God" (I John 3:2), and he reminds us of our privilege in bearing that name. Remember that to whom God gives much He requires much.

Chrysostom (c. AD 347-407) instructed parents to give children scriptural names. He told them to tell the child stories about his namesake as he grew up to give him something to live up to. Brethren, what an awesome name God bids us to live up to!

Is this a paradox? We know that to "see" God we must be like Him. Carnally, we think that to be like Him we must first see Him! God says, "No!" If we saw Him in our flesh, we would either satisfy our curiosity or be so overwhelmed by His glorious perfection that we would give up. God's way is best. He has chosen to operate His purposes for man by faith. "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (II Corinthians 5:7). He reveals what He is by His names and by the life of Jesus Christ. By faith we can emulate Him through His Spirit.

Malachi 3:16-17 encourages us in these trying times:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD

and meditate on His name. "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, "on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

Philippians 4:8 instructs us to think on whatever is true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous or praiseworthy. These are what God is in His entire existence. The people of Malachi 3:16-17 meditated on His name so they could imitate and praise Him and communicate these things to each other. They looked for God's good hand in every area of their lives.

This commandment stands as a bulwark against idle profanity, outright blasphemy, two-faced hypocrisy and empty religiosity. Though these may escape the judgment of men, God warns that He sees them and will not hold such people guiltless. We can avoid this by living to build the reputation of His great name.

David writes:

I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the LORD ; the humble shall hear of it and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, **and let us exalt his name together.** (Psalm 34:1-3)

Edgar Guest wrote this poem, *Your Name*, that illustrates our responsibility toward bearing God's name:

You got it from your father. 'Twas the best he had to give.
And right gladly he bestowed it. It's yours the while you live.
You may lose the watch he gave you—and another you may claim,
But remember, when you're tempted, to be careful of his name.
It was fair the day you got it, and a worthy name to bear.
When he took it from his father, there was no dishonor there;
Through the years he proudly wore it, to his father he was true,
And that name was clean and spotless when he passed it on to you.
Oh, there's much that he has given that he values not at all.
He has watched you break your playthings in the days when you were small.
You have lost the knife he gave you and you've scattered many a game,
But you'll never hurt your father if you're careful with his name.
It is yours to wear forever, yours to wear the while you live.
Yours, perhaps, some distant morning, to another boy to give.
And you'll smile as did your father—with a smile that all can share,
If a clean name and a good name you are giving him to wear.