

The Third Commandment

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Forerunner, "Personal," September-October 2008

It is not hard to determine what the most common sin is. It is idolatry, a sin of commission. Five commandments bear directly on it: the first, second, third, fourth, and tenth. In addition, the others easily become involved in idolatry by being broken in their spirit. This article will focus on another commandment, the third, that connects directly with the sin of idolatry. Many of us do not generally understand its purpose. In fact, most of us understand it only in its most obvious application, and thus unknowingly, we may break it frequently.

Recall that the first commandment deals with *what* we worship. Our worship is to be directed toward the unique Creator, the Source of all things, and toward Him only. The second deals with the *way* we worship, in spirit and truth. No one has ever seen the unique Creator God, so we must use no figments of human imagination to portray Him. The third involves the sincere truthfulness, purity, and *quality* of our worship. It deals with glorifying God.

Isaiah 40:18, 25 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." From the second commandment, it is obvious that God expressly forbids the making of any representation of Him. Any such picture or statue is automatically a lie because, other than knowing that we are in His physical image as to form and shape, everything else that He is cannot be expressed in a mere physical depiction.

John 1:18 confirms this 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." God is unique; nothing compares with Him. There is no point of contact, no physical reference, to which a human being can compare Him, revealing the absolute folly of image-making. Even Jesus' declarations regarding God are never about what He looks like, but are all about His authority, position, purpose, character, and attributes.

However, knowing the importance of His purpose to our lives, should we not strive to learn what He is like? God does not want us concerned about what He *looks* like, for that puts the emphasis in the wrong area. He gives us enough information for us to know that He looks like a man—and that is enough.

However, He greatly desires that we know what He *is*. The entire Bible reveals His mind, character, attributes, offices, power, will, promises, plan, and relationship to us. The third commandment deals with these areas of study and application because they deeply affect the quality of our response to Him.

The Commandment

Exodus 20:7 says, "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, like the second, includes a warning within it. What does He mean by "not hold him guiltless"? Sometimes God deliberately understates a warning as a subtle form of emphasis, which ultimately magnifies its meaning. The penalty for taking God's name in vain is *death* !

It is helpful to define four words used in this command:

» **Take** : Several Hebrew words are translated into the English word "take," but this one means "lift up," "bear," "carry," "use," "appropriate."

» **Name** : The Hebrew root denotes something high or elevated, a monument implying majesty or excellence. It is an outstanding mark, sign, or reputation. Thus "name" is a word by which a person, place, or thing is distinctively known. A name identifies, signifies, and specifies.

» **Vain** : The underlying Hebrew word suggests emptiness, futility, and/or falsehood. It implies lacking in reality, value, or truth. Its single-word synonyms—depending upon the context—are "futile," "worthless," "profane," "foolish," "reproachful," "curse," "blaspheme," "purposeless," "useless," "inconsequential," "unsubstantial," and "vaporous."

» **Guiltless** : This word indicates "free," "clear," "innocent," "clean," "blameless," "unpunished."

This commandment has nothing to do with the proper pronunciation of God's name, which no one knows for certain how to say anyway. It also has nothing to do with superstition or magic. This commandment's application is much broader, deeper, and more dignified than that.

It pays dividends in insight and understanding to take notice of biblical names. In biblical thought, a name is not merely a label of identification but also an expression of the bearer's essential nature. It includes its bearer's reputation, character, and distinctiveness from others. For example, in all probability Adam named the beasts based on his observations of the distinctiveness of their natures. Similarly, to know the name of God is to know God as He has revealed Himself, that is, to know some of His nature.

This same thought is true of many biblical characters, providing insight into understanding them within the events recorded about them. To illustrate, Jacob supplants his brother Esau twice. A supplanter is one who by skill, deceit, or force takes the place of another. When this happens the second time, Esau says, "Is he not rightly named Jacob?" (Genesis 27:36). Regarding the birthright and blessing, Jacob takes Esau's place using his supplanting nature.

Another clear example occurs when Abigail pleads with David for Nabal's life: "As his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him!" (I Samuel 25:25). *Nabal* means "a dolt, a vile person." Thus, the Bible shows that a name tends to exercise constraint on a person to conform to its nature.

In Hebrew thought, then, a name is inextricably bound with the named thing's existence. Nothing exists unless it has a name, and its essence is concentrated in its name. Hence, creation is not complete until Adam names all the creatures. To cut off a person's name is to end the bearer's existence, or to change a person's name is to indicate a shift in his character and standing before God. Revelation 3:12 adds to this picture:

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

Note the import of the Philadelphians receiving three new names! They reveal the very existence, nature, and responsibility of these heirs of God's Kingdom.

God's Nature in His Names

To speak or act in another's name is to act as that person's agent and to participate in his authority. To be called by another's name implies that person's ownership, and one bearing that name falls under the authority and protection of the one whose name is called upon.

The third commandment sets the standard of the spiritual cleanliness in a person using the name of God because it is so weighty. It must be used or borne in truth, without hypocrisy or vanity but in purity of conduct. A person is better off being sincerely wrong than being a professing Christian and denying God's name by the conduct of his life.

Herbert Lockyer's book, *All the Divine Names and Titles*, lists 364 names and titles for Jesus Christ alone. Through His names and titles, God has chosen to reveal a great deal about His attributes, offices, authority, prerogatives, and will. Each name designates some distinct virtue or characteristic of God's nature. Thus, God has made known the glory of His nature through His names. They are not to be abused.

This commandment is certainly against common swearing, including the use of euphemisms so common in this Protestant society, examples of which are "gee," "gosh," "golly," "cheese and rice," "got all muddy," "jiminy cricket," and "doggone." However, it also includes the light or disrespectful *use* of any of God's attributes or character traits. More directly than any other, the third commandment teaches how much God is to be a part of our every word, deed, and attitude.

Consider that to help us to know David, the Bible shows him as shepherd, warrior, king, prophet, poet, husband, father, musician, sinner, and penitent—each part of a rich and varied nature. Yet, God is manifold times greater than David! The Bible reveals Him, His nature, in a similar way, by adding names to aid us in identifying His many glorious characteristics. God names Himself what He is, just as He names people what they are. Thus, Jacob is at first a supplanter, yet when he changes, God names him more appropriately for his new life. *Israel* is "one who prevails with God."

God's Names in the Psalms

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth, who have set Your glory above the heavens! Out of the mouth of babes and nursing 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)

Modern translations replace "excellent" with terms like "glorious," "great," or "majestic." The glory of God is revealed in His creation. One of His names, of course, is Creator. The psalmist sees the starry heavens stretched above him as an awesome and spectacular showcase of the majestic power of God.

The Soncino Commentary translates the second phrase of the first verse as, "Whose majesty is rehearsed above the heavens." The author comments, "The psalmist is saying that day after day man has the awesome splendor of God's power displayed before him." Thus, God has invested the heavens with glorious splendor to direct the mind of man to the Creator's majesty. This idea accepts that He is greater than even His creation demonstrates.

What excellence or glory do we see in the earth and sky? Do we consciously realize that a creator, any creator, is greater than what he creates, and do we then apply that inference to God? Do we see in it our holy Creator's power, order, beauty, loving providence, wisdom, reason, logic, and vastness of thought? Some measure of this will occur if we make the effort to seek Him.

God intends this psalm to direct our thinking toward His greatness and puny man's insignificance. Yet, that majestic, awesome God is glorifying Himself in man by creating in him the desire to be like Him! He has chosen what is weak and foolish—even by the world's standards—to appreciate and respect His glory, His name. Rightly understood, this is a truly humbling meditation.

God also reveals Himself as the eternal covenant God, who, though our master and owner, has made an agreement with man. "Lord" is translated from *Yahweh*, called among the scholarly "the Tetragrammaton" (YHWH), the "I Am Who I Am" of Exodus 3:14. "Lord" is the Hebrew *Adonai*, the Master or Owner of the whole universe!

Psalm 23:1 says, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," another instance of *Yahweh*. This name for God is frequently combined with other words to form more specific descriptions of Him. Psalm 23 is in reality a brief expounding of eight names of God in the first five verses. It brings to light:

YHWH-Roi—God our shepherd—Psalm 80:1.

YHWH-Jireh—God our provider—Genesis 22:14.

YHWH-Shalom—God our peace—Judges 6:24.

YHWH-Nissi—God is my banner—Exodus 17:15.

YHWH-Ropheka—God our healer—Exodus 15:26.

YHWH-Zidkenu—God our righteousness—Jeremiah 23:6.

YHWH-Shammah—God is present—Ezekiel 48:35.

YHWH-Mekaddishkem—God who sanctifies—Exodus 31:13.

Each of these names provides us with building blocks of knowledge to strengthen and encourage us in the use of faith.

Psalms 18:1-3 provides us with a fitting example from David's life:

I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies.

David begins by declaring, "Fervently do I love you!" and then delivers a torrent of God's names, eight of them! He knew God's attributes as expressed by His names, trusted what they taught him, and conducted his life accordingly. By faith, he trusted God to intervene in the affairs of men. Paraphrased, the eight names are "strength," "foundation," "place of safety," "fountain," "deliverer," "my strong God," "defender," and "horn of my salvation."

Consider what David did in light of a modern circumstance: When the car needs repair, we take it to the person who has the title ("auto mechanic") or name (reputation). We do not take it to the dentist. In like manner, we are to seek God in our need in areas in which He has revealed Himself to us as skilled and willing to help. However, where does that leave one who has not sought God and does not know what He can and will do or what He requires?

God's Glory Revealed

The episode in Exodus 33 sets the stage for what occurs in the next chapter. We should pay special attention to verses 12-13, 18 and the terms "name," "way," and "glory." Moses, a man like us, wanted to be reassured—by seeing God's glory.

And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, . . . the Lord talked with Moses. . . . Then Moses said to the Lord, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.' Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people." . . . So the Lord said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name." And he said, "Please show me Your glory." 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." (Exodus 33:9, 12-13, 17-19)

Moses may not have gotten the answer that he expected. If so, what God gave him was exceedingly better—and very instructive to us:

Now 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 the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:5-7)

Here is how God obliged Moses: Besides passing before him and revealing His form except for His face, He preaches to him what amounted to a sermon on His name—on the third commandment! He

expounds eleven attributes: *Yahweh*, *El*, the Merciful Being, the Gracious One, the Longsuffering One, the Mighty One, the Bountiful Being, the True One, the Preserver of Bountifulness, He who bears away iniquity, and He who visits iniquity.

God did not demonstrate for Moses His power and majesty, but His love, His way of relating to His creation. In other words, the glory of God is the manifestation of His character, His nature, His manner of dealing with His people, His potential children. His names are signposts of His attributes and character. They advertise His nature. They remind us of what we can expect Him to do and what He requires.

A Better Revelation

Normally, an individual cannot see God or be as close to Him as Moses was. Besides, what we have learned was written in Hebrew and translated—perhaps even somewhat vaguely at times—into English. Where does that leave us who come along millennia later and cannot read Hebrew? Matthew 11:25-27 begins to answer this question:

At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that 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 the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

Undoubtedly, God is being revealed to us, but how? Two factors are at work in this. In speaking to the apostles, Jesus reveals the first: "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. . . . But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear" (Matthew 13:11, 16). The second factor appears in John 1:14, 18:

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.

What is being declared is the glory of the Father! John 14:9-10 expands this:

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Phillip? 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 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."

The Father is declared to us through the life, works, and words of Jesus Christ! Moses asked God to show him His way. Jesus is saying, "If you want to see what God is like, if you want to see the mind of God, the nature of God, if you want to see God's attitudes, look at Me."

He is "the way" (John 14:6) because only He of all mankind, unmarred by sin, has intimate knowledge of God. He shows us the way men *must* live, including the direction, manner, and method of doing things. The way to God and His Kingdom lies in the knowledge of the truth about Him and

that knowledge put to use in one's life. This is precisely the knowledge Christ gives. To illustrate this, if we are in a strange city and ask directions to a place, confusion is the likely result. Yet, when we ask Christ for direction, He says in effect, "Come, follow Me. I'll take you there."

Some people may teach truth, but He embodies it; He personifies truth. A person may teach geometry, and his character does not affect his teaching. However, if one teaches moral truth, his character is all-important because it colors what he teaches. Colossians 1:15-16 and 2:9 provide a clear statement of Jesus' nature:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. . . . For in Him dwells all the fullness of the [divine nature] bodily.

He does not merely reflect godliness or simply reveal God in His teaching—He was God in the flesh. He was and is completely holy, having the authority to judge the world. We can have no clearer view of God than by observing Him.

He is the full revelation of God in the flesh, the complete and unique expression of God in a human body. God became a man, and the Father imposed on Him the same time-space limitations He imposes on other men. He had every opportunity to waste time, fall ill, be a glutton, get drunk, suffer headaches, become angry, strike out at others, become bitter or depressed, work, play, face the deaths of loved ones, and His own as well. In the gospels, we see God coping with life on the same terms as other men.

Now we can see what kind of character God possesses, giving us firsthand information on what life is about so that we can cooperate with Him in His purpose. We see God teaching, healing, laying down His life, correcting in love, and patiently counseling.

Bearing the Family Name

Jesus says in His prayer in John 17:3, 11:

And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. . . . Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.

For the purposes of this article, of primary importance is that the term "know" has sexual connotations. It implies intimate, experiential knowledge, not merely bookish or theoretical knowledge. He suggests that having an intimate relationship with the Father and Son causes us to become one with them. The only way we can do that is by living the way God does by faith. He walks—lives life—with those who agree with Him. The One who already had this unique relationship with God reveals to us the knowledge of how to do that.

Originally given to a spiritually faltering people, Amos 5:4 adds a vital command: "For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: 'Seek Me and live.'" The word "seek" is not being used in the sense of "search" because God had already revealed Himself to them. Instead, it conveys the sense of "turn to Me," "seek to live as I do," "turn to My way of life," "seek to know Me in intimate detail."

In John 17:3, "eternal" is translated from the Greek *aionis*. Here, it deals not so much with duration of life, since by itself living forever would not necessarily be good. Rather, it implies "quality." Eternal life is the life of God, the way He lives life. To possess it is to experience a small measure of its splendor now.

Four times in this one prayer, Jesus uses the word "name" in reference to God. "Name" represents, identifies, signifies, and encompasses what He is revealing to us about God. It includes what He is in His Person, His attributes, and His purpose. God's name keeps, guards, and sustains us, both by our trusting what it signifies and then, through obedience, expressing what it means.

Psalm 9:2, 10 declares, "I will be glad and rejoice in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High. . . . And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek You." "Name" does not refer to what He is called or the sound of that name, but to what He is like in His nature and character. We can trust what He *is*. This has marvelous implications for us. Matthew 28:19-20 says:

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" in verse 19 can just as correctly be translated as "into," meaning that we are immersed into the name of the Father and Son. We now bear that name! They are God, and we are children of God. Baptism and the receipt of the Holy Spirit are the entrance into that name and all it implies! We have entered into the Family of God! Just as a son bears his father's name, God's name is our spiritual family name.

The Importance of One's Names

A brief review: The first commandment deals with *what* we worship—the Almighty Creator God. The second commandment deals with *how* we worship—in spirit and truth. The third commandment deals with the *quality* of our personal witness to everything that name, which we now bear, implies as it applies to a human son of God.

Proverbs 22:1 instructs us about the importance of one's name: "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold." A person's name, which holds his reputation, could be considered his most valuable asset. How many times does God say, "For My name's sake"?

Edgar Guest wrote a poem, *Your Name*, on the importance of one'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's yours to wear forever,
yours to wear the while you live.
Yours, perhaps some distant morn,
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.

Isaiah 43:10-12 bears on our responsibility to uphold God's name:

"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."

Since we, as sons of God, now bear His name, we witness for God both as an individual, leading our lives, and as a body, preaching the gospel.

Magnifying His Name by Faith

In Romans 2:17-24, Paul provides a distressing contrast to a right example:

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.

By our conduct, we hallow or profane God's name. We keep or break the third commandment the same way. This commandment sets the standard for our witness and tests its quality. God's name is the standard. If we take the name of God and use it in any way that denies its true meaning and God's character, we are either breaking this commandment or are on the way to doing so.

People can judge and accuse, saying, "This is God's church, and they do such things? If this is the true church, why doesn't God do something about it?" He is patient and longsuffering, and He *will* do something about it. He will save His people for His name's sake, but it will hurt.

The apostle John writes in I John 3:1-3:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies Himself, just as He is pure.

People spend their lives chasing after a name that will bring them a measure of honor or notoriety. They want to be associated with a "name" university, a "name" team, a "name" company; wear clothing with a certain "name" label; drive a "name" automobile; or marry into a certain family "name." Yet, the greatest name that anyone could possibly bear has come to us unbidden. Thus, John is exhorting his readers to remember their privileges in bearing that awesome name. Chrysostom, a fourth-century Catholic archbishop, counseled parents to give children scriptural names, urging them to tell the children stories about the person who bore that name so that, as they matured, they would have something to live up to.

Is there a paradox in what John writes? We know that in order to see God, we need to be like Him. Carnally, we think that to be like Him, we need to see Him. God says that seeing Him is not necessary, as He has chosen to conduct His purposes for man through faith in His Word. He has revealed what He is by His names and by the life of Jesus Christ. By faith, we can emulate Him

through His Spirit. If we saw Him in the flesh, our curiosity would likely be satisfied, or we would be so overwhelmed by His perfection that we would give up. That is how human nature works. God's way of faith is better.

Malachi 3:16 provides wise counsel befitting the times in which we live: "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 who meditate on His name." The people described here are pictured as meditating for the purpose of praising, imitating, and passing on their thoughts to each other. They looked for God's good hand in every area of their lives.

David exclaims in Psalm 34:1-3: "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."

Hallowed be Thy name!