

The Ten Commandments in the 21st Century - 3

The Third Commandment: The Name of God

The third commandment was:

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).

This told the Israelites to treat the name of their God as a holy thing, not to be treated lightly. Nothing should be spoken by them that could bring God's name into disrepute, or damage His reputation.

We feel the same about someone we love deeply. We become angry if someone makes a joke about them, or says they did something we know is untrue. We jump up with indignation and protest, and defend them against the bad accusation. This commandment therefore follows on from the first one. If we love God with all our heart, we will not say bad things about Him. We will be upset if other people mock Him or use His name lightly in a joke or swearing.

Blasphemy

One particular situation where this might occur in Bible times was when men used God's name to try to convince someone they were really telling the truth, but when in fact they were lying. For example, they might say "I swear by God that I will come to see you on Wednesday", and then failed to come on Wednesday. God always keeps His promises.

People who make promises in God's name and who then fail to keep them will not be trusted in the future. But, more importantly, they injure God's reputation, for He always keeps His promises.

That, in fact, is what the Bible means by the word 'blasphemy'. To blaspheme is to injure the reputation of someone.

That is how Caiaphas the High Priest managed to have Jesus put to death. He asked Jesus, on oath, i.e. by God, if he was the Son of God. When he said 'I am', they said he was guilty of blasphemy, and condemned him to death for breaking the third commandment. He had taken the name of God in vain, they said. (Of course, if anyone else had said 'I am' it would have been blasphemy, but in Jesus' case it was absolutely true.)

Also we should not swear an oath to confirm what we are saying. Jesus is clear about that:

I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by



the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King (Matthew 5:34–35).

Swearing

Another situation we come across a lot in the West is the use of God's name in swearing, or as an exclamation. This again is treating the divine name with disrespect, which is completely unacceptable.

It is interesting that the Jews, to avoid breaking the Third Commandment, used to avoid speaking the name of God at all in conversation. For example, instead of saying 'the Kingdom of God' they would say 'the Kingdom of Heaven'. But that was only a change of description – it meant the same thing.

We can add to the name of God the name of Jesus His Son, who is also described as Lord and King. To misuse his name is as bad as wrongly using the name of God.

God also has highly exalted him [Jesus] and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth (Philippians 2:9–10).

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Due Respect

How does this command apply to the Christian? Well, as Christians we too should treat the name of God with full reverence. He is our heavenly Father, whom we love, but He is also a great King.

We must always speak about our God in a manner of reverence and respect. We should not swear when things go wrong, or use His name to express surprise or anger. If we have to work with people who do swear in this way, we could politely but firmly ask them not to do so in our hearing.

Paul insists our mouths should be free from coarse language:

...neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks (Ephesians 5:4).

Now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth (Colossians 3:8).

So the third commandment supports the first and the second – they are all about the greatness of God and our attitude to Him.

We worship Him only, because He is the only true God. It therefore follows that we do not make rival gods and worship them, or let other things take His place; and as we saw here, we speak about Him in terms of respect.

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