

An Examination of the Ten Commandments

CALLING GOD A VAIN WITNESS

“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God,
for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”

— Exodus 20:7

We have seen how the first command tells us *who* to worship and the second instructs *how* to worship Him. The third commandment speaks to the *reality* of our worship. We are not only to worship God alone through Christ alone, we are to worship Him truly. When we call upon His name we must honestly be engaging in worship and not simply going through the motions. And when we are not in formal worship services, but are traveling the normal course of our lives, we must not use His name frivolously for that belies a lack of worship at the core of our being. We must bring our whole lives to gathered worship and live out the reality of that worship in all that we do.

The name of God is not just a word, it is an invocation. All throughout Scripture God’s people are those who call upon the name of the Lord. There is indeed power in the name. This command is a prohibition against misusing that power. It guards us from superstition on the one hand and practical atheism on the other.

“God’s name is a living reality with implications in every area of the life of his people.”

— Ed Clowney

WHAT DOES THIS LAW REVEAL ABOUT GOD’S CHARACTER?

God cares about His name. As we saw in the previous commandment He is jealous for the exclusive devotion of His people and this is connected to that—He will not share His glory with any but those upon whom He confers His name. His character will not abide contempt for His name. As we see this rightly it opens to us new depths of the gospel. This holy and righteous God who is due all honor, majesty, and praise gives us His name and takes us into His royal family. He is the everlasting Yahweh who makes Himself known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His exaltation of His name in Christ and His prohibition of its careless use reveal a God of unimaginable wonder.

WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT US?

God has placed His name on us. We are not to live vainly. Not taking His name in vain means far more than refusing to curse using His name—it means honoring His name in all that we do as bearers of the name of Christ. As the Larger Catechism reminds us we are not to be ashamed of His name nor are we to bring shame upon it.

We all desire to be associated with greatness. God has made us so. We like to meet famous people, visit great places, be seen with the movers and shakers. Innate within us is a desire to fulfill our destiny as image bearers of the King. We can easily drop names to prop up our need for this kind of importance, but we are not to misuse His name—to brandish it for our purposes, but rather we are to so live as to bring glory to our Father’s name, that the world might see our good works and give glory to God

HOW DID CHRIST FULFILL THIS LAW?

Jesus said that people would use His name to accomplish great things, but in the end not know Him at all. This misuse of His name demonstrates the power of His name. Even without them knowing Christ by calling upon His name mighty acts were done. But His name is not a magic charm. His name is the name that is above every other name. His name is the essence of our Creator, Redeemer, and God. Jesus comes not only to fulfill this law in the sense of keeping it by resisting any temptation to falsely curse or swear by it; He fulfills it by revealing the full power of His name used rightly.

He has demonstrated His power over even death itself and bids us come and ask for whatever we ask in His name. Is this the way in which we are praying for new life for our neighbors, friends, coworkers, and family members who are trapped in death without knowing this name? Or do we vainly speak His name, but never call upon it for His purposes? God has made Himself known through Jesus Christ and His name is powerful to save. His is the name we are to call upon in faith and repentance. It is not a magical incantation, but a holy invocation, calling upon God Himself to bear witness to our confession of sin and acceptance of grace. This name has more power than we can possibly imagine and He gives it to us His people to use well.

“Worship is seeing the worth of God and giving God what he is worth.”
— Timothy J. Keller

FLESHING IT OUT—POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE LAW

WLC Question 111 Which is the third commandment?

The third commandment is, “You shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain.”¹

Question 112 What is **required** in the third commandment?

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 holy 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.²

Question 113 What are the **sins forbidden** in the third commandment?

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; **violation of our oaths** and vows, if lawful and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful; **murmuring** and quarrelling 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.³

Question 114 What **reasons are annexed** to the third commandment?

The reasons annexed to the third commandment, in these words, [The Lord thy God,] and, [For the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain,] are, because he is the Lord and our God, therefore his name is not to be profaned, or any way abused by us; especially because he will be so far from acquitting and sparing the transgressors of this commandment, as that he will not suffer them to escape his righteous judgment; albeit many such escape the censures and punishments of men.⁴

¹ Exod. 20:7

² Matt. 6:9, Deut. 28:58, Ps. 29:2, Ps. 68:4, Rev. 15:3–4; Mal. 1:14, Eccl. 5:1; Ps. 138:2; 1 Cor. 11:24–25,28–29; 1 Tim. 2:8; Jer. 4:2; Eccl. 5:2; Acts 1:24,26; Job 36:24; Mal. 3:16; Ps. 8:1,3–4, 9; Col. 3:17, Ps. 105:2, 5; Ps. 102:18; 1 Pet. 3:15, Micah 4:5; Phil. 1:27; 1 Cor. 10:31; Jer. 32:39; 1 Pet. 2:12.

³ Mal. 2:2; Acts 17:23; Prov. 30:9; Mal. 1:6–7,12, Mal. 3:14; 1 Sam. 4:3–5, Jer. 7:4,9–10,14,31, Col. 2:20–22; 2 Kings 18:30,35, Exod. 5:2, Ps. 139:20; Ps. 50:16–17; Isa. 5:12; 2 Kings 19:22, Lev. 24:11; Zech. 5:4, Zech. 8:17; 1 Sam. 17:43, 2 Sam. 16:5; Jer. 5:7, Jer. 23:10; Deut. 23:18, Acts 23:12,14; Esth. 3:7, Esth. 9:24, Ps. 22:18; Ps. 24:4, Ezek. 17:16,18–19; Mark 6:26, 1 Sam. 25:22,32–34; Rom. 9:14,19–20; Deut. 29:29; Rom. 3:5,7, Rom. 6:1; Eccl. 8:11, Eccl. 9:3, Ps. 39; Matt. 5:21–48; Ezek. 13:22; 2 Pet. 3:16, Matt. 22:24–31,25,28–30; Isa. 22:13, Jer. 23:34,36,38; 1 Tim. 1:4,6–7, 1 Tim. 6:4–5,20, 2 Tim. 2:14, Tit. 3:9; Deut. 18:10–14,11–12, Acts 19:13; 2 Tim. 4:3–4, Rom. 13:13–14, 1 Kings 21:9–10, Jude 4; Acts 13:45, 1 John 3:12; Ps. 1:1, 2 Pet. 3:3; 1 Pet. 4:4; Acts 13:45–46,50, Acts 4:18, Acts 19:9, 1 Thess. 2:16, Heb. 10:29; 2 Tim. 3:5, Matt. 23:14, Matt. 6:1–2,5,16; Mark 8:38; Ps. 73:14–15; 1 Cor. 6:5–6, Eph. 5:15–17; Isa. 5:4, 2 Pet. 1:8–9; Rom. 2:23–24; Gal. 3:1,3, Heb. 6:6.

⁴ Exod. 20:7; Lev. 19:12; Ezek. 36:21–23, Deut. 28:58–59, Zech. 5:2–4; 1 Sam. 2:12,17,22,24, 1 Sam. 3:13