

WEEK 4: DO NOT TAKE GOD'S NAME IN VAIN

THIRD COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11



The Place of the Passage

The third commandment complements the previous one. The second commandment requires us to know God as he has revealed himself. The third requires us to represent him to others only as he has made himself known. God has placed his name upon his people (Num. 6:27). They bear God's name—upholding his Word, his ordinances of worship, and the other means by which he makes himself known—before the world. They must do so clearly and truly. One must not invoke God's name falsely, either to lend authority to one's own opinions or to promote things God has not actually said. Those who bear his name must faithfully speak only God's will and do only what he has commanded when acting in his name.

The Big Picture

God calls us to speak and labor in his name, being careful not to confuse our own opinions for his.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the third commandment from either Exodus or Deuteronomy. Also read Deuteronomy 18:15–20. Use the following questions to help you consider this commandment's meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176, 340; online at www.esv.org.)

The Lord's Name

In English, *name* refers primarily to the label by which a person is called. The Hebrew word for *name* also refers to a person's label, but by extension it can be used also for other ways by which a person is made known. The temple was said to be the place at which God "made his name to dwell" because of the many ways God had made himself known there (see Deut. 12:5; 1 Kings 9:3). What are the means by which God makes his name to dwell with his people today?

God's name in Hebrew is "Yahweh,"¹ a term that sounds similar to the Hebrew phrase "I AM [present]" (Ex. 3:13–15). In addition to this name, God has many titles by which his character is revealed to us. List several of God's names and titles that you know, and discuss what they reveal about him.

Read Esther 2:22; 3:12; 8:8–10. In those passages, what does it mean to speak and write "in the name of Mordecai" or "in the name of Ahasuerus"? Then read

Deuteronomy 18:5–7; 21:5 and 1 Samuel 17:45. What does it mean to speak or act “in the name of the LORD”?

Taking God’s Name

The third commandment is often thought to prohibit speaking God’s name crassly. Profaning God’s name is certainly included in its concerns. But the command is not simply about speaking God’s name offensively. It prohibits any “taking up” of his name falsely. Reflecting on the passages read in connection with earlier questions, what are some ways in which a person “takes up” the name of another?

In modern society, we have laws against the misuse of another’s name through identity theft or trademark infringement. How do these modern laws that seek to protect another’s name illustrate the concerns of this ancient law about protecting the use of God’s name?

Taking God’s Name in Vain

The word translated “vain” refers to something that promises to be more than it is and therefore fails to deliver as represented. For example, selling a patient

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sugar pills labeled as medicine will leave the patient unaided in his illness. Such tablets are named “medicine” in vain. Read Lamentations 2:13–15 and write down some of the consequences Judah suffered from trusting vain promises proclaimed falsely in God’s name by Judah’s false prophets.

God’s Word has much to say about personal holiness, family values, church practices, business dealings, and civil government. Christians should bring God’s name to bear in all these areas—but only to the extent that God has actually spoken. We must be cautious not to confuse our own strongly held opinions with God’s will (Jer. 23:33–40). What are some ways in which you have seen leaders using God’s name in vain to promote their own agendas?

Not Hold Him Guiltless

There is a warning attached to this commandment, but the warning is vague. The command leaves us unsure how God will punish. It only assures us that he will answer the guilt² of those who break this command. What impact does this unspecified warning have compared to a specific judgment?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

ADOPTION. It is a wonder that God, the just and awesome Creator and Ruler over all, would choose to place his name upon mere humans. To do so is an act of adoption.³ When Jacob adopted the two sons of Joseph to be his own sons, he placed his name upon them: “In them let my name be carried on” (Gen. 48:16). Isaiah also links Israel’s right to call God “Father” with their being “called by your name” (Isa. 63:16, 19; compare 2 Chron. 7:14). The third commandment would be meaningless if God had no interest in placing his name upon us. But in his grace God adopts a people to himself by placing his name upon them.

POWERFUL NAME. The name of God, sealing both his promises and his warnings, is powerful. What he declares, he will perform, principally in his works of salvation and redemption. When people use the authority of God’s name to promote false gospels, empty promises, or selfish schemes, they distract from the true promises of God and cloud the testimony of his Word. Nevertheless, with God’s promise not to hold such violators guiltless he shows his zeal to defend his name and the promises of salvation sealed by it.

JESUS KEPT THE THIRD COMMANDMENT. Just before he went to the cross, Jesus reviewed his entire ministry in prayer. He had preached, he had performed healings, he had eaten and drunk with his disciples and with strangers, he had cared for the poor and confronted the powerful, and he had demonstrated justice and love in all his words and deeds. Summarizing his ministry, Jesus prayed, “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world” (John 17:6). Jesus worked and taught in God’s name, and he did so authentically and not in vain. Jesus kept the law perfectly, including his fulfillment of the third commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE NAME. As Adam and Eve’s family multiplied, their offspring “began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26). That clause probably indicates the beginning of worship gatherings as families expanded and formed communities. It also introduces the use of God’s name to represent his relationship with his

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people. Throughout the Bible the name of God refers to his self-revelation and presence with his people. In particular, God “made his name to dwell” among the people in the temple (see Deut. 12:5; 1 Kings 9:3). And in the final resurrection the symbols of God’s presence will no longer be needed, as “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” will dwell immediately among God’s people (Rev. 21:22).

VANITY. The Bible is full of lessons on the vanity of human attempts to defy the name of God or to bend God to man’s own will. At the tower of Babel humans sought to renounce God and “make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4). God scattered them. In the days of Samuel, when God turned his people over to the Philistines, the Israelites tried to force God to defend them by bringing his ark (the symbol of God’s name in the tabernacle; 2 Sam. 6:2) into battle. Instead, God allowed the Philistines to capture the ark—then later vindicated his name himself among the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:1–6:21). In the New Testament the seven sons of Sceva “undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits,” but they were overpowered by those spirits themselves (Acts 19:13–16). God’s authority must be invoked in keeping with his will. He will not allow his name to be taken in vain.

Theological Soundings

JUDGMENT. God is merciful and quick to forgive those who repent. He is also just and will not ignore the sins of those who do not repent (Ex. 34:6–7). Apart from God’s atoning⁴ grace, any of God’s commandments, if broken, will bring his judgment (James 2:10). The third commandment teaches this warning plainly: “The LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11).

TRUE FAITH. To take the name of the Lord upon oneself requires sincere faith in him and in his promises. Those who claim the name of the Lord for insincere motives, who do not truly trust and believe in him, only increase their guilt before him. The third commandment warns against pretended faith and urges true faith.

BLASPHEMY. The third commandment is about more than blasphemy, but blasphemy is certainly included in its scope. To blaspheme is to curse God’s name or to use his name with contemptuous irreverence. It is a serious sin against God (Lev. 24:16; Matt. 12:31; Rev. 16:9–11).

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue’s third commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make

notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through third commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Yahweh** – The likely English form of the name represented by the Hebrew letters YHWH. The Lord revealed this unique name for himself to Moses at the burning bush and told him to instruct the Israelites to call on him by this name (Exodus 3). English translations of the Bible usually render this term as “LORD,” with small capital letters. (YHWH can also be translated God, in small capital letters.)

² **Guilt** – Responsibility for wrongdoing.

³ **Adoption** – Legal process by which a person gives the status of a son or daughter to another person who is not his or her child by birth. The NT uses the term to describe the act by which God makes believers his children through the atoning death and resurrection of his one and only true Son, Jesus (see Romans 8; Galatians 4).

⁴ **Atonement** – The reconciliation of a person with God, often associated with the offering of a sacrifice. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ made atonement for the sins of believers. His death satisfied God's just wrath against sinful humanity, just as OT sacrifices symbolized substitutionary death as payment for sin.