

The 3rd Commandment: Do not take the Lord's name in vain/Honor the promises God has made ©
Rev. Seth D. Jones -- September 15, 2013
Scripture: Exodus 20:7; Joshua 24:14-18; Matthew 5:33-37

Exodus 20:7 reads as follows: "*You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. For the Lord will not leave unpunished those who take his name in vain.*" Very quickly, how many of you think this has primarily to do with swearing and cussing? It's OK, you can admit it.

As is often the case, the public perception is often a distraction from what is really going on, and it is no different with the 3rd Commandment. It is not that cursing and cussing using God's name doesn't matter; it does, but it is a side issue compared to the much larger picture God is painting for us. So let's dispense with this smaller issue with the 3rd Commandment right now. The problem with cussing and cursing using the Lord's name is that it minimizes and trivializes the name of God and using it in this way erodes the meaning of God's name. It is a misuse, but not primary or even secondary in our consideration of this commandment. However, George Whitefield, the Great Awakening preacher from the 1700s would strongly disagree with me. He preached a very long sermon arguing that this is precisely the point of the 3rd Commandment.

But by focusing on this aspect we diminish the point of the 3rd Commandment. What is really going on here is how we make promises with one another. The issue in the 3rd Commandment is making promises that will be broken and using God's name to make those promises. Whether deliberately or by circumstance, the breaking of promises in God's name is a great dishonoring of the person of God. This is why the outcome of such behavior is punishment, according to this Commandment. When we '*swear to God*', or to put it another way, when we place our hand on the Bible, figuratively or literally speaking, say we are going to do something, '*by God*', '*in God's name*', or '*I swear to God...*', we are asking God to bless and honor the covenant and promise we have made. To do so "in vain", or with the intention never to fulfill it, or built on human pride and vanity, is an offence against God.

This gets to why we make oaths, or promises, or contracts and covenants with one another in the first place. Don't we do it because we have an innate mistrust of each other's ability to fulfill their side of the promise? Making a promise in God's name already presumes the promise is made because, without having made the promise, we would simply take what we want without any regard for the other person, without any regard for the neighbor.

When we think of the 10 Commandments, it is easy to get hung up in the legal aspects of them, in the if/thens, in the '*what am I supposed to do*' parts of it all. But think about what these are all about; they are about the common good, how to live well with one another. They are framed in the negative because, without the negative reinforcement, we would set them up so there were no barriers to defrauding people, gossiping about one another, stealing from each other, sleeping around, dishonoring elders and God in all kinds of ways. So God tells us what not to do, sets out guardrails, so that we, the free people of God in Christ with the freed people from Egypt can truly live in freedom. We can live in the freedom from acts of evil, for where evil is active and present, there is no freedom, and we can live in the freedom to serve God and one another, which is where true freedom begins to really express itself.

So we make promises to overcome our innate inability to honor the neighbor without the presence of God and the conscience afforded by the gifts of God. When we make promises in God's name, in our best moments we are seeking to lift one another higher in action and thought, to bring one another closer to the Kingdom of God.

But Jesus says in Matthew 5 that even that approach doesn't go deep enough. Once again, Jesus, in his fulfillment of the Law, drives us deeper into the Law, into the implicit opposite within the Law, which is all our promises and covenants with one another and with God are built on the promises already fulfilled and promised to us in Jesus Christ. When we rely on God's promises, our promises are also backed by God's promises. That is a pretty high order, isn't it?

Jesus is saying here (and I grant there are many interpretations with this verse, and they are not mutually exclusive) that you swear on everything except God. You make promises based on natural objects. You make them based on governments and the authority of kings. You make them on the basis of personal reputation and self-reference. And yet you still break those promises. By *not* swearing on God's name, you think you are making an out for yourself because you have not used God's name. But in doing so, you forget God is the Creator of all things, God oversees all governments and rulers and God knows you to the very core of your being.

Jesus pushes us to a deeper and more foundational adherence and commitment to God's law. In the 3rd Commandment, we must understand that God gives all things out of love. The Law is a gift of God's love to us, and how we make promises with one another, how we covenant with one another as a church, how we exist within the contracts we make is at once a far deeper relationship with the person and institution we have committed to in those promises, and at the same time a far greater relationship to God than we could have imagined. What is really happening, Jesus is suggesting, is *a behavior and commitment issue*, not a promise-keeping issue.

John Calvin says that Jesus is telling us that, if we are sincere and our sincerity is combined with the simplicity of our reliance on God, that alone carries the weight of an oath. In other words, our simple "Yes, Yes" or "No, No" should be enough if we are truly committed to God and Christ. By relying completely on God's promises, just our actions and our words alone *are* our oaths, promises and covenants. Or to put it more simply, a follower of Christ shouldn't have to make promises and covenants because your actions in the way you say "Yes" or "No" will negate the need for promises and oaths.

How do we make promises with our families, our churches, our business relationships, our government?

I really believe we don't understand the value of oaths, promises and covenants in our society. We have a problem with commitment, and commitment problems are almost always a problem of either our sense of self-worth or some sort of oppression by cultural standards, financial disparity or covert and overt racism, sexism or any other 'ism' which disempowers others. In other words, our inability to keep promises, whether individually or institutionally, is because we have lost the ability to respect one another. Saying "Yes" to something, for those of us following Jesus, means also saying "Yes" to the fulfilled promises of God. Saying "No" to something means saying "No" to those things which diminish the name of God in creation, in our relationships or in our public transactions. As Calvin also says, "Have nothing on the tongue but what is in the heart."

This is why Joshua is so demanding in our reading today. He is asking the Jewish people to remember the promises of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who led your parents and children out of Egypt, out of slavery. Stand by the promises of God and choose to live by those promises which you have seen fulfilled. Joshua says, "*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*". And the people acknowledge and affirm what God has done for them, just as God has promised, and they said, "*Therefore, we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.*" Let's all say that together. "*Therefore, we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.*" In saying this with the Israelites, we are saying "Yes" to God. We are saying "Yes" to the promises of God. And for us, it means we are saying "Yes" to Jesus Christ. We rely on the promises of God when we make promises with one another.

Hebrews 6:13-20 says, *“When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.”* God’s promises precede our promises and are fulfilled through Christ on our behalf.

Most of you have agreed to this already. You have already committed to the “Yes” of God and Christ, or someone has done so on your behalf, when you were baptized. In baptism, we use the name of the Lord with Jesus and the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the waters of baptism in order to wrap the person in the promises of God. Our promises made during baptism are predicated on the promises already made and already fulfilled by God through Jesus Christ. Those promises are meant to frame our entire life, from first breath to last. In doing so, God’s name is used in the service of whatever is good, true and beautiful. This is what Martin Luther says the intention of the 3rd Commandment is all about.

Jesus intensifies the 3rd Commandment, just as he does all the others. He pushes us deeply in the promises of God and the foundation of our very lives. They are not suggestions or just good ways of living a life. They are the “Yes” to the “Yes” God has already given to us in giving us life, giving us faith, in giving us Christ. So now, when we use the name of the Lord with another person, backed as we are by our baptism and by the promises of God, we not only reflect God to one another, we see the reflection of God’s image in one another.

David Lose, my advisor at Luther Seminary, puts it this way: *“Jesus intensifies the law not to force us to take it more seriously or less seriously, but instead to push us to imagine what it would actually be like to live in a world where we honor each other as persons who are truly blessed and beloved by God.”* This is the height of respect. This is the goal of the 3rd Commandment and all the commandments - that the respect God has for us is also the respect we have for one another - neighbor and stranger alike. And it is this respect, this honor, this seeing the other as blessed and beloved by God that is the foundation to all the covenants, promises and oaths we swear with one another. Because God made them first for us.

Amen.