

Lesson 26: Questions 58, 59, 60, and 61

58-61

In our last lesson we considered the second commandment. We saw that God must be worshiped only as He has appointed, that His ordinances must be received, observed, and kept pure and entire, that worship by images or any other unauthorized way is forbidden, and that God's jealousy is a holy zeal for His own glory and the covenant purity of His people (Q54-57). Now the catechism turns from how we worship God to how we handle His Name. The third commandment teaches us that the God Who reveals Himself must be spoken of, confessed, worshiped, invoked, and represented with holy reverence.

Question 58: What is the third commandment?

Q. Which is the third commandment?

A. The third commandment is, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

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, ESV)

At first, many people hear this commandment and think almost entirely of profanity. That is included, certainly. Using God's Name as a swear word, an exclamation, a joke, or emotional filler is wicked. It is not a small matter to drag the Name of the Holy One into careless speech. But the commandment is much broader than that. It forbids taking God's Name in vain, and God's Name includes everything by which He makes Himself known.

In Scripture, a name is not merely a label. God's Name reveals His character, authority, presence, covenant faithfulness, and glory. When the Lord reveals His Name, He is not handing man a religious sound to use casually. He is making Himself known. Therefore, to take His Name is to deal with His self-revelation. To take His Name in vain is to handle that self-revelation emptily, falsely, lightly, hypocritically, manipulatively, or wickedly.

This means the third commandment reaches speech, worship, doctrine, prayer, vows, preaching, baptism, church membership, evangelism, discipline, and daily Christian conduct. If we call ourselves Christians, we bear the Name of Christ.

Jesus commands:

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." (Matthew 6:9, ESV)

If we pray thus, we are asking that His Name be regarded as holy. If we sing His praise, confess His truth, teach His Word, swear lawful oaths, or gather as His church, we are handling holy things.

The commandment also teaches us that reverence is not optional. God does not say, "Try to be a little more respectful." He commands us not to take His Name in vain. There is a kind of casualness that people mistake for spiritual maturity.

They assume that:

- Because God is Father, they may be flippant
- Because Christ is Friend, they may be familiar in a fleshly way
- Because grace is free, they may be frivolous with holy things

But biblical intimacy with God never destroys reverence. The adopted child cries, "Abba! Father!" by the Spirit, but that child still approaches the Holy One.

So Question 58 introduces the third commandment as a commandment about holy reverence toward God's revealed Name. The true God must be worshipped.

He must be worshipped as He commands.

And His Name must be handled reverently.

Question 59: What does the third commandment require?

Q. What is required in the third commandment?

A. The third commandment requireth the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works.

The catechism now opens the positive requirement of the commandment. The third commandment does not merely forbid wicked speech. It requires something: "the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works."

FIRST, it requires holy and reverent use of God's names. Jesus teaches us to pray, "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*" (**Matthew 6:9**). That petition should govern the whole Christian life. We are asking God to cause His Name to be treated as holy in the world, in the church, in our homes, in our speech, in our worship, and in our hearts. Deuteronomy also warns Israel to "*fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God*" (**Deuteronomy 28:58**). His Name is not ordinary. It is glorious and awesome.

SECOND, the commandment requires holy and reverent use of God's titles.

Psalms 68:4 calls God by His covenant Name and summons His people to exult before Him:

Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the LORD; exult before him! (Psalm 68:4, ESV)

Titles like Lord, God, Father, King, Redeemer, Shepherd, Judge, Savior, and Almighty are not religious decorations. They identify Who God is and how He relates to His people and His creation. To use them rightly is to confess Him truthfully.

THIRD, the commandment requires reverence toward God's attributes.

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Revelation 15:3-4, ESV)

God's attributes are not abstract theology for clever people. They are the glory of God displayed to His creatures. When we speak of His holiness, justice, love, sovereignty, mercy, wrath, immutability, omniscience, and faithfulness, we must speak as worshipers, not as technicians handling dead facts.

FOURTH, the commandment requires reverence toward God's ordinances.

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food, may be despised. But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. (Malachi 1:11-14, ESV)

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not bare symbols for man to manipulate. Public worship is not a religious stage. Church discipline is not personal revenge. Preaching is not entertainment. Prayer is not performance. The ordinances belong to God and must be handled accordingly.

FIFTH, the commandment requires reverence toward God's Word.

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. (Psalm 138:1-2, ESV)

Psalms 138 ties God's Name and God's Word closely together. God is to be thanked for His steadfast love and faithfulness, and His Word is not beneath His Name, but exalted with it. Therefore, Scripture must not be twisted, mocked, ignored, marketed, or used as a prop for our opinions. To read Scripture faithfully is to receive it reverently as the Word of the living God and interpret it soberly and rightly.

SIXTH, the commandment requires reverence toward God's works.

*Remember to extol his work, of which men have sung.
All mankind has looked on it; man beholds it from afar. (Job 36:24-25, ESV)*

Creation, providence, redemption, judgment, and sanctification display God's wisdom and power. We must not speak of God's works as accidents, inconveniences, or raw material for complaint. We may lament faithfully, but we may not despise His hand.

And this also means we must be careful how we speak of man, because man himself is one of God's works, uniquely made in His image.

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."
So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27, ESV, emphasis added)*

This does not mean man is God, nor does it mean that every man bears God's Name in the same covenantal sense that God's people do. But it does mean that man bears the stamp of God's image and contempt for our fellow man is not a small thing. James 3:9-10 makes this connection directly:

With [our tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (James 3:9-10, ESV)

It is deeply inconsistent to bless God while cursing people who are made in God's likeness.

Reviling, demeaning, despising, mocking, or treating our neighbor with contempt is not merely a violation of love of neighbor. It is also a failure to reverence one of God's works. We dishonor the Craftsman and violate the third commandment when we treat His image-bearers as trash.

This does not mean we may never rebuke sin, expose error, correct folly, or speak plainly about wickedness. Scripture does all of those things. But even necessary rebuke must remember that the person being addressed is not an animal, not an object, not a punchline, and not beneath basic creaturely dignity. Man is fallen, guilty, and often wicked. But man is still made in the image of God.

Therefore, the third commandment should govern not only how we speak directly about God, but also how we speak about the works by which God displays His glory. And among those works, mankind has a unique place.

So the third commandment requires total reverence toward God as He has made Himself known. His Name, titles, attributes, ordinances, Word, and works must be treated as holy because He is holy.

Question 60: What does the third commandment forbid?

Q. What is forbidden in the third commandment?

A. The third commandment forbiddeth all profaning and abusing of any thing whereby God makes himself known.

The catechism now opens the negative requirement of the 3rd commandment: "all profaning and abusing of any thing whereby God makes himself known." That language is broad because the commandment is broad. Wherever God makes Himself known, man must not profane or abuse that revelation.

To profane something is to treat what is holy as common.

To abuse something is to misuse it, twist it, exploit it, or handle it contrary to its purpose.

So the third commandment forbids not only blasphemy and profanity, but false doctrine, hypocritical worship, manipulative use of Scripture, empty vows, religious showmanship, careless prayer, irreverent preaching, and claiming God's authority for what God has not said.

Malachi is especially important here.

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the LORD’s table may be despised. But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food, may be despised. (Malachi 1:6-7, 12, ESV)

They were not atheists. They were religious leaders. They were near the altar, near the sacrifices, near the language of worship, and yet they dishonored God. That is terrifying. It is possible to be religious and still profane the Name of the Lord.

This is a warning for pastors, teachers, fathers, mothers, worship leaders, and every church member. The third commandment is not only violated in the bar or on the street. It may be violated in the pulpit, classroom, living room, prayer meeting, counseling session, small group, and Lord’s Day gathering. Whenever God’s Name is used to advance ourselves, excuse sin, manipulate people, argue dishonestly, or dress up our preferences as divine commands, we are in dangerous territory.

If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. (Malachi 2:2, ESV)

That is a searching word. Religious office does not protect a man who dishonors God. Religious usefulness does not excuse irreverence. God sees how His Name is handled.

Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape. (Malachi 3:13-15, ESV)

That is the sin of cynical religion. It speaks as though obedience is pointless, worship is wasted, and God is not worth serving unless He pays out immediately according to our expectations. That too profanes His Name. It treats God as a bad employer rather than the holy LORD.

We should apply this carefully.

The third commandment forbids using God’s Name as a swear word.

It forbids saying, “God told me”, when He has not.

It forbids making promises in God’s Name and breaking them.

It forbids praying with the mouth while the heart is far from Him.

It forbids preaching Scripture as a means of personal display.

It forbids singing great truths while despising them in practice.

It forbids using doctrine as a weapon for pride rather than as truth unto worship and obedience.

This should not make tender Christians afraid to speak of God. The answer is not silence. The answer is reverence. We should pray, sing, confess, teach, and evangelize. But we should do so as those who know that God is holy and that His Name must not be used empty.

Question 61: Why the third commandment?

Q. What is the reason annexed to the third commandment?

A. The reason annexed to the third commandment is, that however the breakers of this commandment may escape punishment from men, yet the Lord our God will not suffer them to escape his righteous judgment.

Question 61 explains the warning attached to the commandment. God says, *“for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” (Exodus 20:7)*. The catechism draws out the point: men may escape human punishment, but they will not escape God’s righteous judgment.

This is necessary because many violations of the third commandment are hard for men to judge. We can hear blatant blasphemy. We can sometimes identify false teaching. We can sometimes see hypocrisy. But we cannot see the heart perfectly. We cannot always know whether a prayer is sincere, whether a vow is honest, whether a preacher is seeking God's glory or his own, whether a religious sentence is spoken in faith or manipulation. Men may miss much. God misses nothing.

The sons of Eli are a sobering example.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD. (1 Samuel 2:12, ESV)

Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt. (1 Samuel 2:17, ESV)

Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. (1 Samuel 2:22, ESV)

These were not outsiders attacking Israel's worship from the outside. They were priests corrupting holy things from the inside. God's judgment came because Eli honored his sons above the Lord by allowing them to fatten themselves on the best of the offerings:

Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?' (1 Samuel 2:29, ESV)

Later, the Lord announces judgment:

And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. (1 Samuel 3:13, ESV)

That is exactly the issue of the third commandment: profaning and abusing the things by which God makes Himself known.

This should sober every leader in Christ's church. Those who handle holy things must not be casual. To teach, preach, administer ordinances, lead worship, shepherd souls, or represent Christ publicly is a serious mercy. It is mercy because Christ uses weak men and ordinary means. It is serious because the Lord will not hold guiltless those who abuse His Name.

"If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting." (Deuteronomy 28:58-59, ESV)

The point is not that every suffering is tied to a specific violation of the third commandment.

The point is that God Himself guards the honor of His Name. He will not be mocked.

We need this warning because human beings are easily impressed by what God hates. A man may take God's Name in vain and become popular. A church may profane worship and grow numerically. A teacher may twist Scripture and sell books. A leader may manipulate people with religious language and gain influence. A hypocrite may fool men for years. But the LORD will not hold him guiltless.

And yet, we must also hear the gospel. Who among us has perfectly honored God's Name? Who has prayed with perfect reverence, sung with perfect sincerity, spoken of God with perfect care, used Scripture with perfect purity, and represented Christ without blemish? None of us.

The third commandment exposes our need for Christ.

Christ alone hallowed the Father's Name perfectly.

Christ alone spoke every word in truth.

Christ alone prayed without hypocrisy, taught without error, worshiped without corruption, and bore the Name of God without vanity.

Christ alone bore the guilt of His people, including our irreverence, hypocrisy, careless speech, and profaning of holy things. Therefore, the warning should not drive believers to despair. It should drive us to repentance, faith, gratitude, and careful obedience.

Conclusion

The third commandment teaches us that God's Name is holy because God Himself is holy. His names, titles, attributes, ordinances, Word, and works are not common things for sinners to handle however they wish. They are holy because they reveal Him.

So take this lesson with you this week in three ways:

FIRST, watch your ordinary speech.

Do not use God's Name as filler, decoration, exclamation, leverage, or cover for your own desires. That includes obvious profanity, but it also includes careless religious language:

- "God told me" (Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!!!) 🤖
- "God wants this"
- "I prayed about it"
- "The Bible says"

Some of this can be valid.

But it is blasphemous when we are really using holy language to baptize our own opinions. Let your speech about God be truthful, careful, and reverent.

SECOND, watch your religious duties.

We must repent not only of obvious irreverence, but also of religious vanity:

- Empty prayers
- Careless songs
- Sloppy doctrine
- Manipulative uses of Scripture

The third commandment reaches everywhere:

- The sanctuary
- The pulpit
- The classroom
- The dinner table
- The prayer meeting
- The heart

Holy things must be handled in a holy way.

THIRD, watch how you treat God's works, especially people made in His image.

We dishonor the Craftsman when we treat His image-bearers as trash.

That does not mean we cannot rebuke sin, expose error, or speak plainly.

Scripture does all of those things.

But contempt, mockery, reviling, and demeaning speech do not fit those who hallow God's Name.

AND YET:

Reverence is not the enemy of joy. Holy fear is not distance from God.

The Name we must not take in vain is also the Name by which we are saved.

We call upon the Lord because He has revealed Himself in mercy.

We hallow His Name because Christ has brought us near.

The Lord will not hold guiltless the one who takes His Name in vain.

But in Christ, forgiven sinners are taught by grace to honor the Name above every name.