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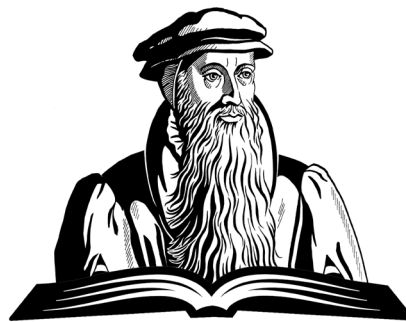
by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #34

The Ten Commandments:

Love for God's Name

Catechism Questions 53 thru 56



The John Knox Institute
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Lecture #34

The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Name

Question 53: *Which is the third commandment?*

Answer: *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."*

Question 54: *What is required in the third commandment?*

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

Question 55: *What is forbidden in the third commandment?*

Answer: *The third commandment forbiddeth all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God maketh himself known.*

Question 56: *What is the reason annexed to the third commandment?*

Answer: *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.*

So far, in the study of the Ten Commandments with the help of the Shorter Catechism, we've looked at the preface and the first two commandments. We've seen that the preface establishes a foundation of grace for true obedience to the believer. The first commandment directs us to the one we are to love and worship, and the second commandment reminds us to worship him only as he has commanded in his Word. In this lesson, we look at the third commandment. And as we'll see, this commandment reveals the attitude we are to have toward this great God. Again, we have four Questions from the Catechism, and we'll deal with the meaning of the Answers more in the main part of the lesson. So for now, let's look at each of the Questions and Answers, with some brief comments to help us understand what's being said.

First, is Question #53 in the Shorter Catechism. It identifies the third commandment: "Which

is the third commandment?”—“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.” We find this commandment recorded in Exodus chapter 20, and verse 7, as well as in Deuteronomy chapter 5, and verse 11. It’s important to notice this word “vain,” in the commandment itself. This word refers to something that is false or empty, weightless. Thus, the text is forbidding us to use God’s name lightly or falsely.

So our second Questions, #54, “What is required in the third commandment?”—“The third commandment requireth the holy and reverent use of God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works.” This sets out the positive requirement. Here we see the words “holy” and “reverent,” both of which are reminding us that God’s name is holy and to be treated as such. And again, we see that the commandments are founded upon what is. God is holy, and so we’re to treat his name and all that he uses to reveal himself with reverence.

Our third Question is #55, “What is forbidden in the third commandment?”—“The third commandment forbiddeth all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God maketh himself known.” You can see a helpful clarification by putting this and the previous question together. In the previous Answer, we read of “God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works.” In this Answer, we read, “of anything whereby God maketh himself known.” In other words, God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works are those things whereby God makes himself known. They all unite in revealing to us God and his will for us.

And, for our last Question, #56, “What is the reason annexed to the third commandment?”—“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.” As we’ll see, this reminds us that God is serious about the reverent use of his name.

Well, let’s get into the main part of our lesson, by looking at three points for our consideration: first, The Name We Are to Love; second, The Way We Are to Love this Name; and third, A Warning for Not Loving this Name.

So first, The Name We Are to Love. The commandment itself forbids us from taking the name of the Lord in vain. We’ll spend more time considering what this means, with the help of the Catechism. But before we do, we must understand what is meant by “the name of the Lord.” When we think of the word “name,” we probably just think of a few syllables that label someone. However, when a name is associated with a person, it serves as a quick way of identifying the person himself and representing him. A name itself may only be a word, but it is representing to us the person, and in some sense, serves as a summary of that person—what he is to us, or what she’s done to us—and the name quickly identifies that person for us. When we get to know someone, the more meaning that the name has to us.

Well, God’s name tells us about God himself. It’s like a quick summary or a message about him for our attention. God’s name is not just a few sounds put together to form the word “Jehovah.” Rather, the name “Jehovah” is representing the one who bears the name. It serves as a quick way to identify this great and glorious God. So we can say, “Who made this world? Who exercised power and wisdom to create all that is here? Jehovah did.” And all of a sudden, with one word, a name, we’ve identified this powerful and wise God who did these things. In other words, a name makes someone known. If you must stay home from church on the Lord’s day because you’re sick, when the rest of your family gets home, you might ask, “Well, who was at church today?” And when you hear the names that your family mentions, you’re not just thinking about the sounds, or the letters, how they’re put together. Rather, the sounds you hear, the names, are causing you

to think about the actual people who are represented and identified by those sounds. If you're familiar with the Bible, the names "Moses," "Ruth," and "Paul," bring up very different thoughts than the names "Goliath," "Jezebel," and "Judas Iscariot." Well that's not because the sounds in their names are good or bad themselves. It's because of the persons associated with these names, and their characters, their actions, and their words are all quickly remembered by you with just the mention of their name.

Here's another and a special example. When Mary and Joseph were told to name the son given to them, which Mary had conceived miraculously by the power of the Holy Spirit, they were told to name him "JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Well, this is full of meaning. The name "Jesus" is related to the name "Joshua," which means "Jehovah saves." So the name "Jesus" is actually telling us about him. He is Jehovah who saves. What a blessed name has been given to the Savior!

Well, this will help us understand what the Catechism is getting at when it says this commandment "requireth the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works." What do God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works have in common? They all help us to know God more accurately and more fully. They reveal God. They tell us something about what he is, what he loves, what he does, what he will do. We don't have time to look at all of his names and titles, or his attributes. But to help you see these things, consider the following examples.

His names—Jehovah, I am that I am. Well, among other things, these tell us of something he is in himself. They remind us of his great transcendence, and his self-sufficiency. And think of the names of each person of the blessed Godhead, the one true God, and the three persons who are that one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. While these names tell us something about God toward us, they are primarily revealing something of what these persons are to one another in the Godhead. The Son is eternally-begotten of the Father, and the Father eternally loves the Son, and the Holy Ghost is eternally communicated by them, and indeed is proceeding from them. Well, there's much in this, as we start to think about the names of God.

Think of his titles—Creator; Judge of all the earth. These show us what he is toward other things. He is, toward the world, Creator. Toward the inhabitants of all the earth, he is their Judge. So these titles are making him known.

His attributes—holy, wise, loving, and so on. Each of these help us consider God's being, by focusing on a display of his perfection. In some sense, to study the attributes of God revealed to us, is to give an intense study of God as relating to other things. So God is holy, most holy. Well, that he is holy tells us of God's glorious being in relationship to what is pure and what is impure; what is righteous and what is sinful. He is entirely pure, and he entirely detests what is impure. Now, this can be done with all of his attributes.

But let's look at his ordinances—these refer to those means he has appointed for his worship—the preaching of his Word, and the administration of the sacraments, the singing of Psalms. Each of these help us to see him more fully. They reveal him to us more clearly. The preaching of his Word, as one example, declares his will toward us. The sacrament of the Lord's supper is another example; it declares his gracious and loving desire to commune with his people. And you can do that with each of the ordinances. They're all conveying to us something of himself and his will.

His Word—his Word is his great gift to us that tells us plainly what he is. It tells us of his purpose. It tells us what his will is. And oh, praise God that he's ever given us his Word which tells us of himself.

His works—when we think of creation out of nothing, how can we not think of the great power and wisdom displayed by such a great work. And so each of his works tells us something about God. His judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah tells us of his holy and just wrath against sinners. His provision of his Son to die on the cross for his people tells us of his great and immeasurable love toward his people.

Well, we could go on, and on, but hopefully we've seen enough to see the main point. God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works all make God known to us. They are intimately associated with God himself.

Well, second, The Way We Love this Name. If we love God, we will honor him, and those means he has appointed to make himself known to us. There's nothing greater than God, and to know him is the greatest privilege we have. Notice that the Catechism says that this commandment requires "the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works." Well, what does it mean to use his name in a "holy and reverent way"? The word refers to something set apart. "Holy" is pointing out something that is set apart from a common use to a special use. God is holy. He is set apart from all vanity, all levity, all sin, all wickedness. If something is to be holy then is to be set apart to God. To use something in a holy way means that we are using it in a way that is set apart from all vanity, and levity, and sin, and wickedness.

And similarly, "reverent" refers to a solemn awe and loving fear toward God and his things. So if we're going to use his name and his titles, his attributes, his ordinances, his Word and works in a holy and reverent way, we will use them without vanity; we'll use them without levity; will use them without sin, and without wickedness. Instead, we'll use them in a way that shows our solemn awe, and our loving fear.

And why does this happen? It happens because we love God, and so we love the things that make God known to us. When we speak of God, we'll speak of him truly, and humbly, and lovingly. When we read his Word, we'll do so with faith, and love, and respect, and humility. And when we attend worship, whether public with the people of God, or private in our own homes, or even in secret by ourselves, we'll do so as those who are in the presence of the Most High and holy God.

We get a sense of this reverence from Ecclesiastes 5, verses 1 and 2: "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few." Similarly, Hebrews 12, verses 28 and 29: "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire." Now, this does not mean that we should be gloomy and never happy as believers. Rather, it means our joy and gladness should be shown reverently to him, who is above all that is. Our joy isn't light and weightless, but it's meaningful and significant. We ought to rejoice in him deeply and sincerely, with great joy, but we must do so in a way that remembers he is God Most High.

If using these means in a holy and reverent way is required, then notice what is forbidden—"all profaning or abusing of anything whereby God maketh himself known." To profane something means to treat something that is holy as common; or worse, to take something that is holy and employ it in explicitly sinful ways. This fails to treat something that is holy, as holy. To abuse something means that we take something holy and use it in a way that is contrary to holiness. And so profaning and abusing are closely related. For instance, if we casually use God's name in a promise, we're both profaning and abusing or misusing his name. When we use God's name

carelessly or casually, we sin. When we make jokes about God, or his Word, or his revealed way, we sin. And this isn't because we, as Christians, are killjoys, who do not wish to have fun. But rather, because as Christians, we see the great weight and glory of God, and of his means of making himself known.

Unfortunately, casually and lightly treating his name is a very prominent sin today. And this, of course, is all the more concerning because it's often found within the church. The commandment itself is focused upon a very clear way that this sin is shown, in swearing an oath or a vow. Oaths and vows are special kinds of promises. In an oath, we call upon God to witness our words before others. In effect, we're saying, my words are true, and I call upon God Most High to witness these things. This is a solemn thought. And so whereas the Bible does not forbid any use of an oath, or any use of a vow, it does forbid the vain use of them, and the casual use of them. You can see that when Christ says, let your yea be yea, and nay, nay (Matthew 5:37). He's not saying, "Never take an oath, and never vow." We see godly examples of oaths and vows in the Scriptures. Rather, he's saying, do not be light in these things, and if you swear, swear truly and solemnly about weighty matters.

Well, a vow is related to an oath, however, in a vow, we make a solemn promise to God himself. We say, "God, I solemnly promise to do (this thing). To do this requires understanding. We cannot vow to God something that is contrary to his Word. And it demands sincerity. We cannot vow to God something that's according to his Word, and yet we don't mean it sincerely. We must understand what we are testifying or promising, and the things that we testify or promise must be true, and we must also be sincere in such things. Thus, to make an oath or vow without truth or sincerity is a great sin, because it is done while invoking God himself.

Peter sinned in this way. When Christ was betrayed, and then taken and then tried, we read of his denying of Christ. Matthew 26, verse 72 says, "And again he"—that is, Peter—"denied with an oath, I do not know the man." Even worse, we read in verse 74, "Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man." And oh, it was a dreadful sin indeed. Peter took God as his witness, and called curses upon himself, saying, "If I do know Jesus, then may God curse me." The one thing this tells us is how easy it is to commit such a great and wicked sin. But also, if you know the rest of Peter's life, it tells us how gracious God is to forgive such a great sin, as he forgave Peter.

Well, we should remember, if we've been baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, we are presently bearing his name. So if we fail to trust his promise, if we fail to live in a way that honors his name, we profane it with our actions, our words, and even our thoughts. Oh, if you've been baptized, remember that God has placed his name upon you. And so think with what weight he comes to you and says, "Take my name, and take it in faith." Own him as your God.

Well, thirdly, A Warning for Not Loving this Name. The commandment itself warns us, "For the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain." This is a searching and sobering warning. The Catechism helpfully explains this: "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." It grieves the Christian that men use God's name in vain so commonly. In fact, it's almost impossible to go through a week, or even a day, without hearing God's name abused. We might be tempted to think wrongly that taking God's name in vain must not be all that bad, since we don't see many outward signs of judgment against those who are so free in taking his name in vain. This is a wrong conclusion. It fails to consider God's Word. He will indeed, without doubt,

punish those who take his name in vain. And what a dreadful misery it will be, when those who so casually took his name in vain will then, for the first time, see the glory of him whose name they took in vain, and if without Christ, they shall suffer that dreadful misery of damnation, because of sinning against so great, so high, so holy and almighty a God. It's then that they will understand that these were not little sins.

Well, we must close. But first, let me encourage you to make a diligent study of God's various names, and titles, attributes, ordinances, word and works. And doing so will help you know him better. These are the things God has given us to know him. And perhaps to help you, you can start with a notebook that you keep near where you do your own reading. And each chapter you read, you can be looking for a new name, or a new title, a new attribute that you've discovered. And you can jot it down, and think upon it. You can look for explanations as well, of what his ordinances are meant to do, and how they make him known. You can record certain works that are recorded in the Bible, and say how this work helps me understand God better. If you do this regularly, you will expand your own understanding of God. What a great privilege that would be.

Well, second, let me press this duty upon you. God is holy. He is Most High. So see what a great and dreadful sin it is to use his name vainly, to joke about his Word, to enter upon his worship casually or carelessly. It is a great grief when ministers joke from the pulpit about God or his Word, because it is not giving God the glory due unto his name. And it's likewise a great sin if we are the ones who misuse his name or joke about these things. God is holy, and so, when we speak of God, or his Word, or works, or these other things whereby he makes himself known, we are to do so with reverence.

What if you have taken God's name in vain? Well surely, it's not "if" but it's that you have, just as all of us have in one way or another. We should see this—there's no hope in ourselves, but there is hope in taking Christ as our Savior. Remember his name, Jesus—that he shall save his people from their sins. Whatever the rest of the world thinks, or even many in the church, God's Word tells us that it is a great sin to treat lightly his name, and everything by which he makes himself known. Well, while it is true that we must cut off this sin, by God's grace, we must realize that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin, and by Christ, we may be reconciled to this great and holy God. And as Christ dwells in us, and lives in us, it is that we may more and more give him the glory due unto his name. As we trust in the name of Jesus, we rightly take his name, and trust him, giving him glory. So, take hold of this great name.

And for those of you who have, and who love God, well then show your love to God by honoring his name, and all that he uses to make himself known.