

To God Alone Be The Glory

The Second Commandment. “*You are not to take the name of God in vain.*” While the First Commandment instructs the heart and teaches faith inwardly, so this Second Commandment leads us outward and directs the lips and tongue into a right relationship with God. For the first things that burst forth and emerge from the inward heart are outward words.

If you are asked, “What does it mean to take the name of God in vain or to misuse it?” you should answer briefly: “It is a misuse of God’s name if we call upon the Lord God in any way whatsoever to support falsehood or wrong of any kind.” This commandment forbids appealing to God’s name or taking his name upon our lips when our heart knows, or should know, that the facts are otherwise—for example, when taking oaths in court and one party lies about the other. God’s name cannot be abused more flagrantly than when it is used to lie and deceive.

From all this people can figure out for themselves in how many ways God’s name is abused. Misuse of the divine name occurs in business affairs and in matters involving money, property, and honor, publicly in court or in the marketplace, or wherever someone swears a false oath by God’s name or

swears falsely by his own soul. This is especially common in marriage matters when two people secretly betroth themselves to each other and afterward deny it with an oath. [In Luther’s day getting engaged {betrothed} was taken as seriously as getting married. Because divorce was rare, people were not to propose marriage or to accept a proposal willy nilly.] The greatest abuse of God’s name, however, is in spiritual matters, as when false preachers arise and present their lying nonsense as if it were God’s Word.

See, all of these are ways people try to deck themselves out with God’s name or to put up a good front or justify themselves with his name, whether in ordinary worldly affairs or in sophisticated and difficult matters of faith and doctrine. Also to be numbered among such liars are the blasphemers, not just the very crass ones who are known to everyone because they disgrace God’s name flagrantly—they should take their lessons from the hangman, not from us—but also those who publicly slander the truth and God’s Word and consign it to the devil.

Let us take to heart how much is at stake in this commandment and diligently avoid every misuse of the holy name as the greatest sin that can be committed outwardly. ‘Lying and

deceiving' are themselves great sins, but they become much more serious when we try to justify and confirm them by invoking God's name and thus make it into a cloak to hide our shame. So one lie becomes two—indeed, a whole pack of lies.

For this reason God has added a solemn threat to this commandment: "*The LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name*" [Ex 20:7]. As little as God will permit the heart that turns away from him to go unpunished, just as little will he permit his name to be used to disguise a lie. Unfortunately it is now a common affliction throughout the world that there are just as few who do not use God's name for lies and all kinds of wickedness as there are few who trust in God with their whole heart.

By nature we all have this "lovely virtue" that whenever we commit a wrong we like to cover it and gloss over our disgrace so that no one may see or know it. No one is so audacious as to boast of the wickedness he or she has committed [at least not in Luther's day; today boasting about wrongdoing is widely practiced in our society]. We [at least most Christians] prefer to act in secret without anyone knowing about what we do wrong. When someone is caught, then God's name must be dragged into it, so that the dirty business may be made honorable. This is the common way things go in the

world, and, like a great flood, it has inundated all lands. Therefore we get what we deserve: plague, war, famine, fire, flood, wayward spouses and children and servants, and troubles of every kind. [Wittenberg, where Luther lived, had suffered all these troubles within the previous six years.] Where else could so much misery come from? It is a great mercy that the earth keeps on supporting and feeding us. [Luther may be thinking about the wicked Canaanites whom the Promised Land had vomited out. See Leviticus 18:28.]

Our young people, therefore, should be trained to hold the commandments in high regard. Whenever they violate them, we must be after them at once with the rod, confront them with the commandment, and continually impress it upon them, so that they may be brought up not merely with punishment but with a reverence and fear of God.

To "take God's name in vain" also includes to curse, swear, practice witchcraft, and in short to do evil of any sort.

With the words, "*You are not to take the name of God in vain,*" God at the same time gives us to understand that we are to use his name properly, for it has been revealed and given to us precisely for our use and benefit. Therefore, since we are forbidden here to use his holy

name in support of falsehood and wickedness, it follows that we are to use it in the service of truth and of all that is good—for example, when we swear properly as often as it is required of us, or also when we teach God’s Word properly, or when we call on God’s name in time of need, or when we thank and praise him in time of prosperity, etc. All of this is summarized in Psalm 50: “*Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.*” All of this is what it means to use God’s name devoutly. In this way his name is hallowed, as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

When this commandment is understood in this way, you have easily solved the question that has troubled many teachers: why swearing is forbidden in the Gospel, yet Christ, St. Paul, and other saints often took oaths. The explanation is this: we are not to swear in support of evil or to swear unnecessarily. But in support of the good and for the advantage of our neighbor we are to swear. Taking an oath properly is a truly good work by which God is praised, truth and justice are confirmed, falsehood is refuted, people are reconciled, obedience is rendered, and quarrels are settled. For here God himself intervenes and separates right from wrong, good from evil. If one party swears falsely, there follows judgment: that person will not escape punishment. Although it may

take a long time, nothing such people do will succeed in the end; everything gained by the false oath will slip through their fingers and will never be fully enjoyed. I have seen this in the case of many who broke their promise of marriage under oath; they never enjoyed a happy hour or a healthy day thereafter, and thus they came to a miserable end with their body, soul, and possessions.

Therefore, children are to be trained to beware of lying and especially to avoid calling upon God’s name in support of it. Where they are allowed to act in this way, no good will come of it. The world is more wicked now than it has ever been. There is no government, no obedience, no fidelity, no faith—only perverse, unbridled people whom no teaching or punishment can help. [The way Luther talks, you can tell how badly things were going in Germany at that time.] All of this is God’s wrath and punishment upon such willful contempt of this commandment.

On the other hand, one must urge and encourage children again and again to honor God’s name and to keep it constantly upon their lips in all circumstances and experiences, for the proper way to honor God’s name is to look to it for all consolation by calling upon it. First the heart honors God by faith, and then the lips by profession.

This is also a blessed and useful habit, and very effective against the devil, who is always around us, lying in wait to lure us into sin and shame, calamity and trouble. He hates to hear God's name and cannot long remain when it is uttered and invoked from a true heart. Many a terrible and shocking calamity would befall us if God did not preserve us through our calling upon his name. I have tried it myself and have indeed experienced that often a sudden, great calamity was averted and vanished in the very moment I called upon God. To defy the devil, I say, we should always keep the holy name upon our lips so that he may not be able to harm us as he would like to do.

For this purpose it also helps to form the habit of commending ourselves each day to God—our soul and body, spouse, children, servants, and all that we have—for his protection against every conceivable need. And so we have the custom learned in childhood of making the sign of the cross when something dreadful or frightening is seen or heard, and saying, “Lord God, save me!” or, “Help, dear Lord Christ!” and the like. Likewise, if someone unexpectedly experiences good fortune—no matter how insignificant—he or she may say “God be praised and thanked!” “God has bestowed this upon me!” etc.

See, with simple and playful methods like this we should bring up young

people in the fear and honor of God so that the First and Second Commandments may become familiar and constantly be practiced. Then some good may take root, spring up, and bear fruit, and people may grow to adulthood who give joy to an entire country. Bring up children with kind and agreeable methods. For what a person enforces by means of beatings and blows will come to no good end. At best, the children will remain good only as long as the rod is on their backs. But when proper training takes root in their hearts, they respect God more than they do rods and clubs.

God is well pleased with the right use of his name and will just as richly reward it as he will terribly punish its misuse.

[Quoted or adapted from Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, © 2000 Fortress Press: Minneapolis, pp. 392-396.]

We have heard God's Law explained well by Luther. Now hear God's Gospel as recorded in Romans 5: “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man... But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” It's much easier to love the Lord and keep his commandments when you know that he loves you and forgives you for Jesus' sake.