



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Speaking for God: An Exploration of the Third Commandment”

1 Peter 3:13-16b; Exodus 3:1-6

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Today we focus on the third Commandment. “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” is how many of us know it from the King James Bible. This commandment is often used to discourage children from swearing. In other words, “Thou shalt not say bad words!” Of course, they learn those words from us. I have a book of prayers written by children. One of them reads, “Dear God: Is it true my father won’t get into heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house?”¹

If only following the third commandment were that simple.

The commandment has a much broader scope. It is a caution against using God and God’s name to advance our own purposes. Every time I hear this commandment, I think of Nazi Germany. The National Socialists were masterful at co-opting the language and symbols of Christianity to promote the Nazi agenda. German soldiers went into battle bearing the words *Gott mit Uns*, God with us, on their belt buckles. I recall a photograph I have seen of a pulpit in a church in Germany during that time. In that photo, the cross and the German swastika are combined into one symbol. This commandment warns against such things.

Author and preaching professor Barbara Brown Taylor summarizes the third commandment in this way:

Don’t throw my name around. A name is a very personal thing, and the fact that you know mine at all is a sign of our closeness. Don’t abuse the privilege.²

Which brings me to the Rev. Fred Phelps. Are you familiar with that name? He died a few years ago. He was the pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas. He came to prominence after the death of Mathew Shepard. The Rev. Phelps and a group from his church protested at Matthew’s funeral. They held up signs that said that when Matthew Shepard died, he went straight to hell. They held up other signs with phrases and words that I will not repeat. Since then, Westboro Baptist has engaged in similar demonstrations hundreds of times. They have picketed the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, with placards reading “Thank God for Dead Soldiers.”

With their signs, with their words, these people claim to speak for God. And they do not speak for God. They are in violation of the third commandment.

Did you notice that I said that without qualification? The Westboro congregation regularly breaks the third commandment. In the past few weeks, I have collected all sorts of examples of other people violating the commandment, folks who take the name of God and use it to promote their own narrow agenda. I have discovered that it is very, very, very, very easy to know when other people are violating this commandment.

¹ *Children's Letters to God*, [Stuart Hample](#) and [Eric Marshall](#).

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, p. 47.

It's a little harder to see in ourselves.

In my early twenties, I lived in a Christian community in New York City. We had weekly gatherings that were part Bible study and part working through our differences. There was another young woman in the group—let's call her Mary—and she and I didn't get along very well. She was, in my opinion, selfish and immature. I wasn't the only one who felt this way and one night we confronted her on her behavior that seemed to be doing damage to the community. We did our best to be truthful and helpful to her. We closed the meeting in prayer. When it came time for me to pray, I said something like “Dear God, help Mary grow in her faith and maturity...help her to live into her responsibilities in this community...”

The meeting broke up and the pastor asked me to stay behind. She needed to talk to me. She looked me in the eye and said, “Don't ever do that again. Don't hide behind prayer to say something that you are afraid to tell someone in conversation. Don't use the name of God in that way.”

She was right. I was violating the third commandment. I was using the name of God to make a point. I was hiding behind the name of God in order to try to change someone, control someone, shame someone.

I'm betting that I'm not the only one in this room who has done that. As individuals, as a church, as a nation, we regularly claim God for our beliefs, our cause, our agenda, our side.

I'm reminded of a quote from the writer Anne Lamott, “You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”³

This commandment challenges us to take responsibility for our own opinions and prejudices and leave God out of it.

What's the big deal? So we occasionally play a little fast and loose with the name of God. I'm sure that God can handle it. This is God we are talking about. Yes, it's God we are talking about. God the creator and redeemer of the world. The most powerful force in the universe. This commandment challenges us to get in touch with that truth. Yes, God is loving and forgiving. AND God is demanding and holy and not to be trifled with.

For the most part in our hymns, our prayers, our sermons—it sounds like we have God all figured out and really God is just a nice, kind, undemanding deity. We worship a God of power and majesty and unpredictability and yet to watch us most Sundays you'd never know.

The writer Annie Dillard suggests that we Christians have grown a little too casual in how we approach God. She writes,

Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ...Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ...The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats... to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return⁴

³ Multiple internet sources.

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*, p. 40-41.

God told Moses that the person who looks upon the face of God does not live. There is something wild, unpredictable and, yes, dangerous about God. We shouldn't mess with God. We shouldn't mess with God's name.

I think I'm going to stop talking now. This is altogether too dangerous. I don't want to play with TNT. Let's not risk violating that third commandment. Let's not risk making a mistake. Let's play it safe.

But—if we are silent—if we are quiet.... then who will speak for God?

I am haunted by the beautiful words from I Peter:

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

We need to speak of God. We need to account for the hope that is in us. There are too many people out there who will never know about God unless we are willing to speak on God's behalf. It's our responsibility, our privilege, our joy to speak of the One who has showered us with love and grace.

How can we tell the difference between abusing God's name and speaking of the hope that is in us? How do we keep from violating the third commandment?

There's no clearly marked path. There are no fixed guidelines. But I can think of a few resources.

One such resource is imbedded in our reformed tradition. It is mentioned in several of the confessions that this denomination holds dear. Originating in the fourth century with St. Augustine, it's called the rule of love. All speech about God is to be in accord with the rule of love, the two-fold commandment to love God and love neighbor.⁵ Do our words elevate love of God and enhance love for neighbor? Then we are in compliance with the third commandment. If our words about God become a two by four with which to hit someone upside the head, then we are abusing God's name and God's word. It's all in that reading from I Peter.

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

In other words, do it with love.

Do our words about God pass the love test? If not, then we probably should keep God out of whatever we are saying and doing. When I prayed for Mary, I didn't pass the love test. The rule of love is a great help in being faithful to the spirit of the third commandment.

Another resource is time. The good and necessary work of discerning God's meaning and intentions for the world is not something done quickly. Deeply listening to the Spirit takes time and intentionality, discipline and humility.

⁵ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, p. 170.

Of course, our best resource is God. We can pray for God's guidance and vision. We can look to the life and words of Jesus. We can try to stick as close to God as we can as we hope and pray that such closeness will help us to honor God's name and intentions.

How dare we speak about God the almighty, the creator and redeemer of the world?

With trepidation. With humility. With reverence. With love.