

“How God’s Great and Holy Name is Taken in Vain”

– Rev. J. C. Oehlschlaeger.

The first commandment judges the heart, that it, in pure and perfect knowledge of God, should fear, love and trust in Him above all things. From this fountain of a heart, fearing and loving God, must flow the fulfillment of all the other commandments. Hence our catechism introduces their explanation with the words: “We should fear and love God.” The second commandment comes out one step and judges the use of the tongue; for the first manifestation of the thoughts of the heart takes place by words. We should also be thankful that God has given us more than the first commandment, in which, indeed, all are already included, because it judges the fountain, from which proceeds the fulfillment or transgression of all the rest, but if we had only the first commandment we could not so easily come to a correct knowledge of our hearts, which is mostly obtained by judging the thoughts, words, and deeds which proceed therefrom. For the correct estimation of these the further commandments were given. In this way we are guarded against the false application of the principle; if the heart is right the works are also right, as if a good meaning of the heart were a full justification of our works. No; the works must also agree with God’s commandments, and if they do not, this is a strong evidence that the heart is not right, however good and right it may think and feel itself.

By the name of God is meant that by which we know and worship God. The name of God, therefore, comprehends everything that pertains to the knowledge and worship of God, as God’s holy name proper, God’s attributes, God’s revealed Word and the holy sacraments. In all these God’s name is as a blessed ointment poured forth for our healing and comfort (Song of Solomon 1:3). The false use or abuse of all or any one of these things is taking the name of God in vain, and therefore forbidden by the second commandment. With this knowledge of God’s name and of the object for which it was given, it is not difficult to discern what is forbidden in this commandment, namely: cursing, swearing, witchcraft, lying, and deceiving by the holy name of God.

Cursing is that sinful use of God’s name, in which it is profaned in careless blasphemy, or in wicked wishes of evil to oneself or to others. The forms in which this cursing by the blessed name of God takes place, are legion. It appears as if the wicked heart of man thought that God had manifested His holy name to men to be a plaything, and expletive, or a weapon of evil in the

hands of enraged passion. Thus, at least, God's name, His Word, and the holy sacraments are laughed and croaked and joked over, are used in the lightest conversation as fill-up words, and are hurled hither and thither in the conflicts of anger and revenge.

Swearing is that sinful use of God's name in which He is called upon as a witness of the truth and an avenger of the untruth. When this is done in the service of unrighteousness (perjury), or carelessly in unimportant matters, as in conversation or without being legitimately called for in one's office, by the glory of God, by the welfare of our fellow-man, or by the authority of the government, it is taking God's name in vain. "I say unto you, swear not at all; neither by heaven, for it is God's throne, nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; neither by Jerusalem, for it is the city o f the great King: neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil" (Matthew 5:34-37).

The carnal Jews had the notion that when they swore oaths by the very name of God, then they were bound to stick to such oaths; but if they had sworn by their head, or Jerusalem, or the heaven or earth, such oaths were not binding upon them, nor of any consequence; and therefore swearing by the heaven or earth and other things in daily life and traffic had become very common among them. Christ forbids such oaths entirely, but He does not do away with true oaths, sworn for the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor.

Witchcraft consists in all superstitious uses of God's name and Word, or of other means which naturally have not the power to effect that for which they are used. This is using God's name and Word in a different way from what their natural virtue indicates, supposing a certain charm to be hidden in them. All such "pow-wow ing," all such charms and amulets and special times and places, however many times God's holy name may be used and whatever strong passages of Scripture may be spoken or written, is taking the name of God in vain, is using it as a plaster, and wickedly separating it from God Himself, who saith: "I am the Lord, that is My name, and My glory will I not give to another, nor my praise to graven images" (Isaiah 43:8).

Lying and deceiving by God's name is also one of the worst forms of transgression of the second commandment. Man has by nature all kinds of perverted thoughts of God and divine things. When he teaches through any office instituted by God, as a preacher or teacher, when he perverts the Word of God by false interpretation to give his erroneous thoughts a divine

appearance, it is lying by the name of God. It is telling an untruth and ascribing it to God to attain for it credence. Such a sin is unfathomable. Such is all false doctrine. Therefore the Lord, who is jealous of His honor, bursts forth in wrath against all false teachers. “Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues and say, He saith; behold I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the Lord, and do tell them and cause My people to err by their lies, and by their lightness.” Oh how *light* many teachers and people take the matter of doctrine. As though false doctrine were an innocent thing. They can grow enthusiastic on the subject of any of the coarse apparent evils, but sit without concern in a congregation in which the doctrines are superficial, light, sweet to the feelings and reason, but a disgrace to the name of God, in which they are proclaimed and to the Word of God, by which they are adorned. It is further lying and deceiving in God’s name, when we have God’s name and Word, even the pure confession of God’s truth, in our mouths, but not in our hearts. When we act the hypocrites. When we pray with our mouths, but not with our hearts. Christ says of the Jews: “This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouths, and honoreth Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me” (Matthew 5:8). Also when we use the sacraments for the sake of appearance or custom alone, without true hunger and thirst after righteousness.

“How God’s Great and Holy Name is Taken in Vain.” by Rev. J. C. Oehlschlaeger is here reprinted from The Lutheran Witness, November 7, 1882, Volume 1, Number 12, page 91. This electronic edition was edited and distributed by: