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THE CHRISTIAN AND GOD'S NAME

Exodus 20:7 - "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."

James tells his readers that "anyone who does not stumble in what he says . . . is a perfect man" (James 3:2). Attempting to control what comes out of our mouths is a challenge for all of us, and it is also vitally important, both for pleasing God and in our relationships with others. Thus, as we turn to the study of the Bible's teachings concerning speech that honors God, we need to give special attention to what for most people is a source of daily sin and failure.

As we move on to consideration of the Third Commandment, we need to look briefly at the key words that make up this short verse. The main verb, translated "take," literally means "to lift up." The basic idea here is to put something on display. Though the focus of the Third Commandment is clearly on language, we should note from the beginning that the proscription is really much broader. After all, we put God's name on display by more than our words. Anyone who bears the name of Christ puts His name on display in everything he does simply by virtue of that profession. We must therefore recognize that all we do has a bearing on the reputation of Christ in the world, and should be a matter for our concern.

Secondly, the commandment speaks of the name of God. In our modern culture, many people have no idea why they have the names they do or what those names mean. Often, names are chosen because parents like the sound, even to the point of making up names that have no meaning at all. This was not the case in Bible times. Then, names had great significance. In many ways, names were thought to define a person's character, so that the father was believed to be exercising a prophetic function when he named his child. Think of some of the names in Scripture that were intended to speak of character or special birth circumstances: Adam, not surprisingly, means "man"; Isaac, because of his mother's response to the announcement of his coming birth, means "laughter"; Esau was "hairy," while Jacob was "a supplanter"; Moses was "drawn from the water," while Joshua, the leader of the Conquest, was named "the Lord delivers" - a name shared with Jesus; Barnabas was "the son of consolation."

We also find in Scripture that names are given to exert authority in redefining who a person is. God changed Abram ("Ram is my father") to Abraham ("father of many") and Jacob to Israel ("a prince with God"); Jesus changed Simon to Peter ("the rock"), and promised to give all who belong to Him a new name (Revelation 2:17). Pagan rulers also tried to redefine followers of God when they brought them into their courts - Joseph was renamed by Pharaoh (Genesis 41:45), and

Daniel and his three friends were given new names by Nebuchadnezzar's chief of the eunuchs (Daniel 1:7).

Why is this important to our understanding of the Third Commandment?

- God's name is inseparable from God's character. His names, given throughout Scripture, tell us who He is. Misuse of the name of God is an insult to His character, and disrespect for His character is a violation of His name.
- When the names of God appear in Scripture, they are always revealed rather than given by people. Only God has the right to define Himself; we have no such privilege.

The Third Commandment refers specifically to the name "of the Lord." The name used here is יהוה - Yahweh, also known as the Tetragrammaton. The interpretation of this command by the Jewish rabbis gives interesting insight into Jewish thought, and also sheds light on how we are to apply the Third Commandment. Rather than seeing in the Third Commandment an insistence that God's name should be treated with respect in all its forms, rabbinical scholars saw here an indication that this particular name of God was more sacred than all others, and thus was to be treated with special reverence. Jewish commentators also practiced what they called "fencing the law." The basic idea behind this effort was that the best way to keep someone from breaking a law was to make sure he would never get himself into a position where he could even think of doing so (this practice was the source of many of the unbiblical traditions of the Pharisees of which Jesus was so critical).

With regard to the sacred name of Yahweh, the fence constructed by the rabbis was a fairly simple one - the best way to avoid using the name improperly is not to use it at all! Thus Jews were taught that the name Yahweh was too holy to pass human lips. Even when the Scriptures were read in the synagogue, Yahweh was replaced by Adonai, another of God's names, whenever it appeared in the text.²⁹ Furthermore, scribes who were copying the Scriptures had to use a fresh pen whenever they wrote the holy Name and discard it immediately afterward. A reflection of this practice of replacing the name of God with other words may be seen in Matthew 5:34-36, which we will discuss at considerable length later in the chapter. Needless to say, Jesus' criticisms of such an overly literal approach to the commandment indicate the breadth with which it should be interpreted and applied. All of God's names are to be equally held in reverence, as are all the ways in which He reveals Himself to man and displays His glory in His creation.

The last key word in the Third Commandment involves the use of God's name that is forbidden - it is not to be lifted up "in vain." What does this mean? When we use the word *vanity*

²⁹ This practice had an interesting and unexpected consequence. When the Hebrew language began to pass out of common use, scholars introduced vowel points - diacritical markings around the consonants in which the Hebrew language is written to indicate proper pronunciation. In connection with this, the vowel points for Adonai were placed around the consonants for Yahweh to remind readers to make the substitution. Centuries later, when Christian scholars discovered ancient Jewish copies of the Bible, they were not aware of what had been done and thought that the consonants of Yahweh accompanied by the vowels of Adonai actually made up a Hebrew word. When they tried to pronounce the result, what they got was "Jehovah," which is not a Hebrew word at all.

today, we usually mean pride or conceit. In Scripture, however, the term refers instead to emptiness or meaninglessness (cf. Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:1,11). It can also refer to falsehood (Leviticus 19:12), or even serve as an oblique way of speaking of false gods (Psalm 24:4). What does it mean to use God's name in a meaningless way? Certainly we ought not to use it "for emphasis" - the application of the Third Commandment with which we are most familiar. But do we not also use the name of God in a meaningless way when we speak it without paying any attention to what we are saying - when we sing praises to God with our minds a thousand miles away, or when the name of God becomes little more than punctuation in our prayers ("Oh, Lord, I thank you so much, Lord, for being who you are, Lord, and I pray, Lord, that you would hear the petitions we bring before you today, Lord . . ."). Thus the commandment requires that we shun not only swearing, but the perfunctory use of God's name with little thought when we are engaged in prayer and worship.

OATHS AND VOWS

While the Third Commandment has a broad application to all our speech, the specific practice that the commandment addresses is the practice of swearing oaths and vows. The circumstance in which the Lord's name was most frequently "lifted up" in ancient Israel was when someone called upon God to bear witness to a promise or to the truthfulness of a statement. We must then consider this application of the commandment before we proceed to broader issues of language.

THE PROPRIETY OF OATHS AND VOWS

Some who take the Bible seriously have problems with the use of God's name in swearing oaths and taking vows because of Jesus' words on the subject in the Sermon on the Mount. He addresses the issue in Matthew 5:33-37, and His words include the rather clear statement, "Do not take an oath at all" (cf. James 5:12). Some groups such as Anabaptists, Quakers, and Jehovah's Witnesses have concluded as a result of this that any oath-taking is a sin against God, even to the point of refusing to take oaths in court.

Is this how Jesus intended us to respond to His words? Not at all. The rest of Scripture indicates that oaths, rightly taken, are right and proper. God Himself takes oaths (Genesis 22:16; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 6:17-18), He requires oaths (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20), and Paul often swore to the veracity of what he said (Romans 1:9; II Corinthians 1:23; Philippians 1:8; I Thessalonians 2:5, 10). God even made provision for people to take the Nazirite Vow (Numbers 6:1-21), and several biblical figures did so, including Samson (Judges 13:5), probably John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), and Paul again (Acts 18:18). Clearly, then, what is being prohibited by Jesus is not any taking of oaths at all, but doing so in some inappropriate manner (see below).

THE SANCTITY OF OATHS AND VOWS

If oaths and vows are permissible, the Bible also indicates that they are to be taken very seriously. One who swears an oath or takes a vow is required to keep it (Numbers 30:2;

Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Joshua 9:18; Ecclesiastes 5:4-5, which speaks of an oath-breaker as a fool; Zechariah 8:17, which says that God hates those who swear falsely). Note that Psalm 15:4 goes even further in its characterization of the man of integrity who is honored by God, describing him as one “who swears to his own hurt and does not change.” The natural conclusion we should draw from this is that one should be very cautious about making promises, since the future is not under our control (cf. James 4:13-16) - the phrase “God willing” should not be an empty cliché, but a recognition of God’s sovereignty and our utter dependence on Him to fulfill the simplest of our plans and promises. Too often we go back on a previous promise because something more attractive comes along. We call back a friend and cancel plans, or beg off from going to work, or rescind an invitation because we like the new opportunity better. But if God honors someone who keeps his promise even when it hurts, we should not so blithely make such changes in plans.³⁰

THE ABUSE OF OATHS AND VOWS

How, then, are we to understand Jesus’ seeming prohibition of oaths in Matthew 5? In order to answer that question, we must remember the context, which clarifies what Jesus was trying to accomplish in the latter part of Matthew 5. In verses 17-20, Jesus is responding to an unstated accusation that He was contradicting or nullifying the Old Testament law. He states in no uncertain terms that He is doing no such thing; He is fulfilling it, while the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees falls far short. His intention is not to “relax” God’s commands, but to expand the understanding of them to include matters of the heart as well as outward behavior. When Jesus uses the words, “You have heard that it was said to those of old,” He is not saying that the Old Testament law was wrong and He is about to correct it. Instead, He is contradicting the rabbis’ *interpretation* and *application* of the law and telling the people what it *really* means.

Thus we must ask ourselves, as we will do frequently in the course of this book, what is the mistaken rabbinical teaching that Jesus is contradicting, and what is the true interpretation of the commandment with which He is replacing it? In the case of the Third Commandment, the issue was a hierarchy of oaths devised by the Pharisees. They argued that the sacredness of an oath depended on that by which it was sworn. Thus, while one should never speak the sacred name of Yahweh, oaths sworn by other names of God were of the utmost seriousness. On the other hand, if one swore instead by heaven, the earth, Jerusalem, the Temple, his own head, or, in modern parlance, “crossed his heart and hoped to die,” the oath was decreasingly binding according to the importance of that by which the oath was sworn.

Now imagine how you would respond, if you lived in that society, to someone who said to you, “Could I please borrow a shekel for a hamburger (or perhaps falafel) for lunch. I swear by my own right hand to pay you back next Tuesday.” You could probably count on waving your shekel goodbye. In other words, the hierarchy of oaths became in the hands of the teachers of the law nothing more than a pretext for breaking one’s word. As a consequence, anyone who sought

³⁰ An extreme example of one who “swears to his own hurt and does not change” is Jephthah, who in Judges 11:29-40 foolishly promised to sacrifice the first thing that met him when he got home if God gave him victory in battle, and wound up sacrificing his own daughter - a difficult incident that would require more time for discussion than we have here.

to affirm a promise by swearing an oath, unless he swore by the name of God, tended to generate suspicion rather than confidence. This was why Jesus told His followers not to swear at all, but simply to be known as men of their word.

What gives us the right to interpret these words within a cultural context and conclude that, when Jesus said "Do not take an oath at all," He really meant, "You are allowed to take oaths as long as you don't use them as an excuse for deception"? The reason is simple - the numerous examples of acceptable oaths given above. The Bible does not contradict itself, and that foundational truth must always guide us in our interpretation of difficult passages and seeming discrepancies, allowing us to bring the complete teaching of God's Word to bear on confusing or uncertain passages.

THE MARRIAGE VOW

Besides the oath taken in a court of law, marriage is probably the vow with which high school students are most familiar. When two people get married, they swear an oath of fidelity to one another before God (Malachi 2:13-16). This oath, as all other oaths mentioned in Scripture, is of the utmost seriousness and is not to be broken (the fact that some sins are of such a serious character as to dissolve the covenant is a matter to be considered under the Seventh Commandment). The thing to remember here is that "for better or for worse" means that God honors one who keeps his oath even when it hurts. Contrary to the prevailing attitude in our society, marriage vows cannot easily be dismissed or disregarded when people or circumstances change, when spouses get tired of one another, or when the grass seems to be greener on the other side of the fence.

The seriousness of the marriage vow is a very important part of preserving any marriage. Beyond the obvious fact that one who takes a vow seriously will determine to keep it no matter what, the marriage vow plays a key role in resolving marital conflicts. After all, if one has the attitude that "I'm in this for life," he will approach conflicts with the recognition that things have to be worked out no matter what it takes because there is no way of escaping the promise that has been made. On the other hand, one who considers the marriage vow flexible will confront conflict with the attitude, "Well, we'll try to work things out, but if not, perhaps we would be better off going our separate ways." Thus every conflict is a potential marriage-buster, and the alternative of divorce hangs over every argument and dispute. One who does not give marriage vows the seriousness they deserve is thus setting himself up for divorce before the marriage even begins.

PURITY OF LANGUAGE

The application of the Third Commandment that most frequently comes to the minds of Christians is the matter of purity of language - to most, it means that Christians should not curse. As we consider this aspect of the Third Commandment in more detail, however, we should first note that the prohibition against misuse of God's name also implies a positive command - that speech is to be used for edification rather than destruction (Ephesians 4:29). Honoring God with our speech doesn't just mean avoiding bad language, but also speaking to build others up.

THE LORD'S NAME

Everyone understands that the Third Commandment forbids the use of God's name "for emphasis," but why is this so? Clearly, exclamations that involve the name of God "take His name in vain" because the speaker is not thinking of God at all, but is merely expressing emotion, whether positive or negative, strong or as part of everyday speech patterns. Though this may be obvious, such language has become so deeply ingrained in the surrounding culture that even many Christians say "O my God!" when something surprises them without a second thought. This ought not to be; it is a direct violation of the Third Commandment, but is certainly not the only way in which God's name is dishonored by people's words.

CIRCUMLOCUTIONS

Some people who try to be sensitive to God's prohibition think to avoid the problem by the use of minced oaths or circumlocutions. These occur when an offensive word is replaced by another word that sounds similar (because it is a corrupted form of the original) and means the same thing, but is considered more socially acceptable. Examples would include saying *gosh* or *golly* instead of *God*, *gee* or *geez* instead of *Jesus*, *heck* instead of *hell*, or *darn* instead of *damn*. But do these really absolve one of the guilt of taking God's name in vain? Jesus' comments to His followers in Matthew 5:33-37 indicate that merely substituting another word for the name of God in no way lessens the seriousness of what is being said; this is especially true when the word that is being substituted is derived from the word the speaker is trying to avoid and means the same thing. The English language is rich enough to allow people to express their emotions without calling on God's name or some variation thereof to do so.

Fine, some of my students respond, that explains why we should try to break our long-standing habits of speech that really involve subtle insults to God's name (sadly, most make no effort to change such speech patterns, while others pay lip-service to the need but make no serious effort to alter their expressions), but what about words like *heck* or *darn*? They don't have anything to do with God's name. They may not be names of God, but they speak of spiritual realities that should not be taken lightly. One who really believes in an eternal Hell to which all who reject Christ will be consigned will not lightly speak of it, or of sending people there. Any who do so minimize the seriousness of God's judgment.

EXCLAMATIONS

By this point in the discussion, my students are usually starting to get frustrated. "Well, what *can* we say then?" is the typical response, as if somehow my teaching threatens to deprive them of the bulk of their vocabulary. Obviously, many words exist in the English language for the purposes of expressing emotion. Exclamations are many and varied, and most involve no blasphemy or vulgarity (see below). How, then, should we evaluate biblically expressions of emotion such as *Good grief!* (Charlie Brown's favorite), *Rats!*, or *Fiddlesticks!* When dealing with the use of exclamations, two aspects must be considered. The first is the meaning of the word being used, and the second is the emotion being expressed. If the word is for one reason or another sinful, no acceptable emotion can justify the use of it as an exclamation. If the word itself

is harmless (or even meaningless), the exclamation must be judged solely on the basis of the emotion being expressed - if it is godly and edifying, then the exclamation is acceptable; if not, then it should be avoided. Thus the Christian need not stifle his emotions for fear of accidentally blurting out something sinful, but should seek God's help to regulate his speech so that the words that come from his mouth honor God and build up others.

VULGARITY

While Ephesians 4:29 clearly rules out the use of any "corrupting talk," this becomes a bit more difficult to define when we move to the subject of vulgarity. The problem here is that vulgarity is culturally conditioned - it varies from place to place and from one time in history to another (the KJV translation of I Samuel 25:22 gives one example of language that was considered acceptable in 1611 but is thought vulgar now). While the Bible is quite clear about avoiding misuse of the names of God, it doesn't provide for us a list of words that constitute "corrupting talk."

First of all, the subject matter of vulgarity is generally derived from two aspects of human experience - sexual and excretory functions. Words describing these universal aspects of human existence are considered vulgar because such things are by their very nature private, and ought not to be mentioned in polite conversation; the culture defines them as "unmentionables." Yet not all words for the same body parts or functions are considered equally vulgar. One can speak calmly of excrement or talk about a baby pooping in his diaper, but other words for the same thing ought not be spoken by one who seeks to practice pure speech and edify those around him. Similarly, one may discuss sexual intercourse in a clinical fashion without embarrassment, but we all know that certain other words for the same behavior simply ought not to be said. Why is this true? Why should one spelling for an idea be condemned while another is accepted? Does this make any sense at all?

Again, we must turn to the culture for an explanation. In English, the vital distinction goes back to the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century. When William the Conqueror won the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Normans settled in England and became the new aristocracy, reducing the native Anglo-Saxons to serfdom. Over time, through living together and as a result of intermarriage, the two peoples merged into one, as did their languages.³¹ The original class distinction was preserved, however, in the way synonyms were treated. When speaking of almost anything, those with wealth and education would naturally use words with Latin roots, while the peasants would favor Anglo-Saxon. As far as words for sensitive subjects were concerned, the way the Norman French talked about such things was "polite," while the words used by the serfs were common or "vulgar."³² Thus the words considered vulgar are defined as such because of the roots from which they came hundreds of years ago.

³¹ This is why the English language has such a large vocabulary - almost everything can be said in at least two ways, derived from both Latin and Anglo-Saxon roots.

³² Check it out in a dictionary. The rude words always have Anglo-Saxon roots, while the polite ones come from the Latin.

The obvious question that arises at this point is, "Why should our language be limited by the sensitivities of the medieval English aristocracy? Such distinctions mean nothing today!" This may well be true, but the identification of these words as vulgar continues to characterize the larger social consciousness, no matter how freely such words enter popular conversation and the media today. The issue is not whether the identification of such words as vulgar is legitimate; the only matter the Christian should care about is avoiding offensive speech, no matter why it might be offensive.

Another frequent response is, "But such words are part of the culture in my neighborhood. Everybody talks that way and thinks nothing of it; no one gets offended by such language." Besides telling such respondents to ask their mothers if they agree with such sentiments, I always note that we live in a culture that is much broader than our families, our neighborhoods, or our racial or ethnic groups. Our constant desire should be to make our speech as honoring to God as possible, completely devoid of offense, rather than seeking justifications for speaking like everyone else or getting as close to the line of sinful speech as possible.

TEASING AND RIDICULE

What about humor at the expense of others? Surely such sarcastic and hurtful speech is unedifying and fails to show love to our neighbors. Yet much of the interaction that occurs among teens (but not only teens) is of this variety, encouraged and presented as a source of entertainment by the vast majority of the dialogue in television situation comedies. Why do people seem to take pleasure in such speech? In many cases it stems from following bad examples in the media, but it also often has its roots in personal insecurity - I can somehow feel better about myself if I can get people to laugh at what I say and bring someone else down in the process. Yet some still seek to justify it. Note the following:

- "It's just done in fun. Nobody takes it seriously, and no one is hurt by it. Lighten up!" In some cases this may be true, but the fact is that we never know how our words affect others. Someone who seems to have no trouble laughing when others make fun of him may be hiding pain inside him, and this pain may shape his outlook on life and himself for years to come, and no one will ever know it.³³
- "Criticism administered through humor is kinder than direct confrontation." Attitudes like this show why teasing is often so hurtful - those who profess to mean nothing by it really have a hidden agenda, and mean exactly what they say. Besides, the Bible advocates honest confrontation and constructive criticism (Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1), not subtle messages that may hurt without helping. Teasing as disguised criticism is really the coward's way out grounded in the fear of man, shows no respect for the ability of the other person to accept criticism, and assumes that I know better than God does about how to deal with people.

³³ I grew up in a large family, and brotherly banter was part of the normal routine around the house. Not until my youngest brother, who naturally was the target of many of the barbs, reached adulthood was he willing to admit how hurtful those interchanges "just in fun" had been.

HUMOR

In Umberto Eco's mystery novel *The Name of the Rose*, an elderly monk named Jorge of Burgos argues that humor is sin because Jesus never laughed, and because it teaches people not to take life seriously. Certainly not all humor is vulgar or blasphemous, nor is it found in ridicule and putting others down. What about humor in general? Is it something that can be edifying?

WHAT IS HUMOR?

Humor derives from many sources, but the foundational one is incongruity. We find things funny when they simply don't fit, or when they go contrary to our expectations. Humor also takes the forms of exaggeration (verbal or visual), plays on words such as puns (Shakespeare used these with great frequency), or slapstick, where pratfalls and incidents that in normal life would be harmful are funny because we know they are not (e.g., the Three Stooges). Why we laugh at such things is basically unknown - scientists and psychologists have tried to figure it out, but have been unable to do so. They have determined, however, that laughter is good for our physical and emotional health (e.g., the scene in *Mary Poppins* where the supremely serious bankers begin floating toward the ceiling when they begin to laugh), though the nature of that humor differs widely from one culture to another.

THE BIBLE USES HUMOR

Scripture gives no warrant for the dismal conclusions of Jorge of Burgos. The Bible uses humor for a variety of purposes. Note the following:

- Jesus used hyperbole (Mark 10:25) when illustrating the negative impact of riches on a person's spiritual life.
- The description of the fate of the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:14-16 is an example of visual slapstick, though one could hardly argue that the pain in the story was not real.
- Jesus (Matthew 16:18) and Paul (Philemon 11) used puns, and Scripture contains many other examples of plays on words in its poetic passages.
- Sarcasm was sometimes a weapon of choice for the prophets of God when they ridiculed wicked kings or idolaters (I Kings 18:27; 22:15-16; Isaiah 44:9-20).
- God Himself is said to laugh at the folly and pretensions of the wicked (Psalm 2:4; 37:13; 59:8).
- Passages such as Ephesians 5:4 and James 4:9 refer to vulgar humor and frivolity when solemnity is called for, and should not be seen as condemnations of humor in general.

CHRISTIAN USE OF HUMOR

How, then, should Christians approach the question of humor?

- Vulgarity, blasphemy, and verbal put-downs are not suitable sources of humor for the Christian. We should neither speak in such ways nor encourage those who do by our responses, nor should we seek out such humor as a form of entertainment.

- Incongruity is beneficial in pointing out the reality that we live in a fallen world where things simply “don't fit.” Such humor has the serious purpose of exposing sin, making us look clearly at the absurdity of a sinful world, and encouraging us to long for the perfection we can never find in a life made foolish by the Fall.
- Wickedness deserves to be held up to ridicule. God and His prophets did it, and we should not be afraid to show in humorous ways the follies of the world around us.

LITERATURE AND DRAMA

We have concentrated most of our attention under the Third Commandment thus far on the words we speak. But what about other uses of language? If the Christian is not to let certain words pass his lips, what about his eyes and ears? In the final section of this chapter we will consider the application of the Bible's teaching about language to what we read, to participation in dramatic performances, and to the use of language in creative writing.

READING

The basic question here is, “Should a Christian read a work of literature that contains sinful language?” Note that the same fundamental principles apply to music to which one would listen and television and movies one chooses to watch. After all, if we are to think on those things that are honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8), does this not rule out filling our minds with what is vulgar, blasphemous, and dishonoring to God? Several points should be noted here:

- It is impossible to isolate oneself from the sinful world (I Corinthians 5:9-10). Jesus surely heard plenty of unsavory language when He mingled with tax collectors and sinners, and He did not for that reason shun their company.
- Benefits are to be gained from knowledge of the world and its ways of thinking. Shared cultural experiences can provide openings for conversation that might lead to opportunities to present the Gospel, knowledge of how the world views life can equip a Christian to speak into that perspective, and Christians can appreciate the literary or cinematic talents God has given to unbelievers and praise God for them.
- Note that each of the comments above implies *purposeful* interaction with the works of the world. Jesus didn't hang around with publicans and sinners because He thought they were fun guys.
- The above also imply *critical* interaction with the world. One of the great dangers of quality literature (or even bad literature) is that we are drawn into the action and language and absorb the worldview and values of the author without even being aware of it.
- Christians should not take pleasure in what is vile and blasphemous. If you can sit down and enjoy a movie or a book filled with sex and bad language, you need to ask yourself about your values and what your heart really seeks after.
- Saturation with evil is to be avoided. Sometimes exposure to evil for good reasons can be justified, but the line is soon crossed where we are influenced by the images we see, read, and hear. The old computer adage GIGO - “garbage in, garbage out” - is relevant here

(How bizarre that one could speak of a computer adage as *old!*). What we put into our minds will stay there (despite the fact that what we study for a test never seems to), and eventually help to shape our thinking and behavior.

- Not everyone will make the same decisions about what movies to watch or what books to read. Different people are sensitive to different things. One person may be able to read a book with one sex scene and skim over it with little effect, while another may, after finishing the book, remember nothing else. Some can distance themselves from the impact of what they read, see, or hear and give a biblical critique, while others become so emotionally involved that critical thinking becomes virtually impossible. Knowing yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, and being honest about your besetting sins is vital if you are to please God in this area.

PARTICIPATION

This question is of particular interest to me since I started acting in school productions in high school and continued through college, and have for more than thirty years directed plays at The Christian Academy. This question consequently has been one with which I have had to deal frequently from a variety of perspectives.

The standard argument here is that the conventions of the stage require one to separate the actor from the character, and thus the actor ought to speak in the way the character speaks, even if the character uses language that the actor would never use outside the environment of the play. To do anything else would be dishonest, both to the artistry of the playwright and to the reality of the character. And besides, if an actor can act out a murder on stage without being a murderer, why should we not conclude the same about blasphemy? As both an actor and director, however, I have refused to use bad language or ask others to do so. My reasoning, with which my actors are very familiar, is as follows:

- Divorcing himself from the character he plays is not easy for an actor. If this were not the case, why then do so many star actors and actresses wind up having affairs with those with whom they do love scenes in a play or movie? Some directors even advocate “method acting,” where identification with the character is encouraged and the actor is taught to “get into” the part so far that he feels what the character feels, thus allowing the dialogue to flow naturally from within.
- Swearing is the only sin that cannot be portrayed on the stage without committing it. One who acts out a murder on stage can do it without murdering; the same is true with theft, anger, ridicule, or slander. But blasphemy is by its very nature a sin of the spoken word, and one simply cannot swear on stage without swearing.
- Audiences typically view plays only once, but actors practice, sometimes for months, to pound their lines into their heads. Every year when we finish a play, the cast members have a tendency to spout lines from the script at every opportune (or sometimes inopportune) moment in class or in the hallway. This is called saturation, and the warnings above apply. We ought to be careful about what we impress upon our minds.
- The idea of separating character from actor on the part of the audience is fine in professional theater or in movies, but is not as likely where my students live. Whether in

high school or college, many in the audience know the actors personally, and when a certain character does something unexpected (like kiss on stage, which always draws a reaction), the audience sees the actor, not just the character. Because of this, what an actor does on stage can easily have an impact on his testimony, especially if he is on a secular campus and is known to be a Christian. Such a person should never risk being seen to speak out of two sides of his mouth if he wishes to honor Christ.

- Other aspects of this issue are even more difficult. For instance, should a Christian accept a part in a play containing blasphemous language if his part does not? The intrinsic worth of a play and the amount of bad language are factors that need to be considered here (e.g., Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), though not all will make the same decisions.³⁴

WRITING

What about a Christian who is a creative writer? Should he include sinful language in a novel or short story in order to give a faithful portrayal of the character and his environment? This is difficult question, but the following should be noted:

- The Bible accurately records examples of blasphemy in the mouths of the godless (Genesis 4:23-24; Psalm 14:1; Matthew 12:24), and of course in the words of Satan (Genesis 3:4-5). The length of the list in the previous sentence also indicates that such uses of language are exceedingly rare in the Bible.
- Scripture accurately records evil, but never sensationalizes it or uses it for mere entertainment purposes. It always clearly portrays evil as being evil.
- Christian authors who have produced some of the most realistic and powerful portrayals of evil in the history of literature have managed to do so without having to resort to bad language. Works that come to mind include C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
- An author who chooses to write vulgar or blasphemous words is responsible for putting those words into the minds of his readers. If so, is he guilty of being a stumblingblock, of causing others to sin?
- Lastly, motive matters. Why does a writer feel the need to include sinful language in what he writes? Is the purpose for edification or for effect? Each writer must answer this question for himself.

As we conclude our study of the Third Commandment, we should again remember where we started - this is a problem with which all struggle, and that struggle will only be won if we really desire to please God in our speech and if we daily acknowledge our dependence on the grace of God to send out of our mouths those words that honor Him and lift up those around us.

³⁴ I had to struggle with this in college and am not at all certain that I always made the right decisions. In one case I am sure I did not, when a friend was directing a student production and was having trouble finding actors; the language in the script was appalling, but he pleaded with me to take a small but important part that had no lines at all, and I agreed. Today I would not have done so.

