

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 113 a

Abuse of God's Name

Halifax, 29 August 2010

Introduction

Today we continue our study of the third commandment:

- 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.

This commandment tells us what we are not to do—what we are forbidden to do—that we are not to take God's name in vain,

- But we have seen that by implication, this means that we are to confess and use His name in a holy and reverent manner.
 - Obviously, if we are not to take it vain or consider His name unimportant and of little esteem, we are to consider it of great importance and to highly esteem it.

And I have also shown you what it meant by God's name...

- that it speaks of everything that God reveals to us about Himself—all that is associated with Him including **His titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, works, and whatsoever else there is by which he makes himself known**

You can see why the way we deal with God's name would be emphasised...

- This is the way we are most directly associated with Him—is through His name.
 - Think about this—you are associated with people in different ways...
 - You are associated with a baby by feeding it and holding it and changing its diapers and praying for it and speaking to it—
 - These are the ways you are associated with it, and the kind of relationship you have with the baby is determined by these things.
 - You are associated with the LORD in a very different way.
 - You don't feed Him or hold Him or even pray for Him and you certainly don't bathe Him, and even though you speak to Him, it is very different than way you speak to a baby because the relationship is entirely different.
 - The most direct association you have with the LORD is with His name.
 - How do you respond to what is revealed about Him?
 - Do you ignore it? do you count it as unimportant or irrelevant?
 - Your relationship with the living God is not good if that is the case.

- It would be the equivalent of a parent who ignored his baby—who did not associate with the baby in the way that babies ought to be associated with.
- We do not supply God with things that He needs...
 - But He reveals His name to us and we respond to Him—either ignoring His revelation to us or with reverence and highest interest and devotion.
 - His connection with us is through the revelation of His name to us.
 - So what we do with His name because terribly important!
- The point is, when you boil it all down, what we do with God’s name is what we do with Him.
 - We are required to take His name, and we are required to do it in a way that honours Him.
 - As the answer to Q 112 puts it,
 - **The third commandment requires, that the name of God, His titles, attributes, ordinances, the word, sacraments, prayer, oaths, vows, lots, works, and whatsoever else there is whereby he makes himself known, be holily and reverently used in thought, meditation, word, and writing; by an holy profession, and answerable conversation, to the glory of God, and the good of ourselves, and others.**

But now we want to move on to look at the negative side of this commandment.

- This is expounded for us in the Westminster Larger Catechism in Question 113

Q. 113 What are the sins forbidden in the third commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the third commandment are, the not using of God’s name as is required; and the abuse of it in an ignorant, vain, irreverent, profane, superstitious, or wicked mentioning, or otherwise using his titles, attributes, ordinances, or works, by blasphemy, perjury; all sinful cursings, oaths, vows, and lots; violating of our oaths and vows, if lawful; and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful; murmuring and quarrelling at, curious prying into, and misapplying God’s decrees and providences; misinterpreting, misapplying, or any way perverting the Word, or any part of it, to profane jests, curious or unprofitable questions, vain janglings, or the maintaining of false doctrines; abusing it, the creatures, or anything contained under the name of God, to charms, or sinful lusts and practices; the maligning, scorning, reviling, or anywise opposing of God’s truth, grace, and ways; making profession of religion in hypocrisy, or for sinister ends; being ashamed of it, or a shame to it, but unconformable, unwise, unfruitful, and offensive walking, or backsliding from it.

Now of course I am not going to try to look at all of this today.

- Some of what is covered here we have already looked at in our study of Question 112—“What is required in the third commandment?”
 - Especially, this is the case with the first sin that is mentioned in Q. 113, that of “not using God’s name as is required.”
 - We have seen that we are to confess His name, to acknowledge and own the true God as God, in all the various ways that His name is revealed to us.
 - Last week, we saw that we are to thank Him for His works of creation, providence, and redemption.
 - The week before we saw that we are to take vows and oaths in His name and to do this with sincerity and faithfulness, doing what we have said because we have associated His name with our promise.
 - The week before that, we say that we are to use the means of grace with reverence—the word, sacraments and prayer are used by Him to impart grace to us. Therefore we are to esteem them highly and make diligent use of them.
 - And before that, we looked at the way we are to use His names and titles and attributes with reverence because these reveal His glory to us.
 - To fail to do this, is, of course, a sin forbidden in the third commandment.
 - That is all I want to say about this first point in the answer to Question 113, that we are forbidden to not use God’s name as required.
- This week, I want to move on to look at the next part of Question 113 where it described various ways that we abuse God’s name that are forbidden:
 - It says:
 - **and the abuse of it [God’s name] in an ignorant, vain, irreverent, profane, superstitious, or wicked mentioning, or otherwise using his titles, attributes, ordinances, or works, by blasphemy, perjury...**

The scripture reading I have chosen speaks about one particular way of abusing God’s name—blasphemy.

- It is 1 Timothy 1:1-20.
- In this passage, Paul tells us that blasphemy is something that characterised him before he was converted.
 - Listen as I read to you from 1 Tim 1:1-20.
 - READ> 1 Tim 1:1-20.

You see that Paul speaks of blasphemy twice.

- In verse 13, he says that he was a blasphemer.
 - He went around speaking against Jesus.

- In Acts 26:11, he explains that part of his “work” involved trying to force believers to blaspheme:
 - Ac 26:11: And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.
 - He is amazed that even though he did all this, he was forgiven and put into the ministry!
- The second mention of blasphemy is in verse 20.
 - He speaks of two men in the church—who had become blasphemers.
 - He warns Timothy that if he does not stay alert in the battle, maintaining faith and a good conscience, he may suffer shipwreck like these men did.
 - But he has delivered them over to Satan (put them out the church) that they might learn not to blaspheme.

Blasphemy is one of the main ways that God’s name is abused.

- So as we consider this topic today, I want to begin with blasphemy.

I. Blasphemy! It’s such an ugly word, isn’t it?

A. Sometimes, it seems like a word that is only used by fussy Pharisee types.

1. And it is true. They use it a lot!

- Those who believe the truth are often accused of blasphemy by extremists of various stripes who have not the saving grace of God in their hearts.

a. Jesus was falsely accused of blasphemy:

- Matthew 9:3: They brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!"
- This is the very sin that Jesus was accused of by the Jews when they determined that He ought to be crucified:
 - Matthew 26:63-66: And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! "What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death."

b. Stephen was also falsely accused of blasphemy.

- Acts 6:9-14: Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; "for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."
- c. Today we hear of Muslim extremists who become enraged and violent because of blasphemy against their prophet...

TRANS> All this causes us to have negative associations, not so much with blasphemy as with those who accuse others of blasphemy.

2. We almost seem to have the idea that it is wrong to charge anyone with the sin of blasphemy.
 - a. This is partly due to our effeminacy and humanism—
 - Effeminacy causes us to say that it is just wrong to charge anyone with showing disrespect to a superior...
 - And humanism causes us to say that unless wrong is done to another person or an animal, no great wrong has been done.
 - b. We suppose that God doesn't much care if we speak against Him.
 - 1) We suppose that He ought to be big enough to take an insult.
 - That is the way we think...
 - We do not realise that He has real honour and that a grave injustice is committed against His person when He is insulted.
 - We have lost a sense of this injustice and think He ought to let it go.
 - 2) And we feel that God should want us to be authentic—
 - even if being authentic means that we spew out blasphemy against Him—accusing Him of injustice, folly, wickedness, or weakness!
 - Of course I am not suggesting that we are to be hypocritical,
 - but rather that we should repent of our blasphemous thoughts and be ashamed of them.
 - Think of in human relations—
 - If being authentic means that I am going to beat some one up, then I need to be ashamed of what I am and repent—
 - not be true to what I really feel!

TRANS> But don't you agree that we don't seem to regard blasphemy as wrong, or at least not as a very great wrong?

3. In justification of what I am saying, how often do you hear of blasphemy among modern Christians?
 - a. We hear about immorality and gossip and pride, but what about blasphemy?
 - Is it ever even rebuked?
 - Is anyone put out of the church for it?
 - Is it even a category for most people?
 - b. A lot of Christians do not even know quite what blasphemy is.

B. You must realise that blasphemy is a real sin that greatly offends the Lord.

1. In our text, we see this...
 - a. Paul is amazed that he was *forgiven* for blasphemy.
 - You learn from this that it is not something that doesn't matter, but something that needs to be forgiven.
 - It is a serious offence that requires atonement by nothing less than the blood of Jesus Christ.
 - We ought not to look upon it lightly.
 - b. You see also, from verse 20, that Paul turns two men over to Satan to teach them not to blaspheme.
 - This means that he had them expelled from the church—outside the kingdom of God—to be tormented by the accuser.
 - They were removed from the protection and the comfort of the church to face up to their sins.
 - This was not something that the apostle just overlooked!

TRANS> Blasphemy was not just a sin in the Old Testament.

2. The New Testament includes blasphemy as a sin right along with other sins...
 - a. Jesus mentions it with other sins in Matthew 15:19-20:
 - Mat 15:19-20: For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man...
 - b. In Colossians 3:8, Paul calls believers to put off the sin of blasphemy.
 - Col 3:8: But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.

- c. And in 2 Timothy 3, he describes blasphemy as something that is characteristic of this present age:
 - 2 Tim 3:2-5: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

TRANS> Much more could be included, but you see that blasphemy is included right along with other sins.

C. But just what is blasphemy?

- If it is something we are to avoid, we had best know what it is.
 1. In Greek, the word is: βλασφημία
 - It is a compound word formed by putting together the words
 - βλαπτω, which means, *to hurt*
 - and φημη, which means *fame*—
 - So it is to injure someone's fame, or that which is known about them...
 - To harm or attack their reputation, or their name.
 - So when a person blasphemes God, they are speaking against Him, they are attacking His name or His reputation.
 - Rather than glorifying Him, they are casting reproach on Him and speaking ill of Him.
 - We abuse His name.
 2. Let me give you a few examples of ways that people blaspheme God...
 - a. There is the way that Paul did.
 - He spoke blasphemous words against Jesus Christ.
 - He told people that He was not the Messiah, not the Son of God, but an impostor and an unrighteous man who was rightly crucified.
 - Some of you did this before you were converted.
 - How your heart was stung when you came to know that He was indeed the loving Saviour who came to die for you.
 - b. There are a lot of unbelievers today who blaspheme God because in their own little minds, they conclude that God is either unjust or impotent.
 - They insist that if He was just, the world would not have all the problems and suffering it has...
 - They say that either He is *unjust* because He allows these problems, or that He is *unable* to make things right.

- It is blasphemy for them to charge God with either injustice or impotence!
 - He is the sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth, and He is pure and holy.

- God's justice is actually seen in our suffering—because we are sinners.
 - And that is where these blasphemers go wrong.
 - They are like the guy who just killed a bunch of innocent people and then accuses the courts of injustice for penalising him.
 - He calls his punishment unjust because he refuses to acknowledge his guilt.
 - These blasphemers will not admit the guilt involved in the rebellion of the human race—the original sin of Adam.
 - They fail to realise that God's punishment and curse upon sin is actually an expression of His justice.
 - Injustice prevails when sin is not properly addressed.

- Of course they will say that God should never have allowed sin to enter the world in the first place...
 - But who are they to reply against God like this?
 - He made us, and it does not make Him unjust if He, for His own purposes, decreed that there should be sin in the world.
 - He has done this in such a way that the sin is our own.
 - We may not like this, but that is what He has done for His own wise and holy purposes and it is for us to accept it.

- We see His kindness in that He entered into this cursed world to redeem us, bearing the full brunt of the curse in the person of His Son.
 - This is goodness that goes beyond justice to an extent that boggles our minds!
 - And He calls all men everywhere to repent and to receive this salvation.
 - The fact that He has decreed to leave some men to make their own choice about this only demonstrates how deep our sin and rebellion really is.
 - It does not demonstrate the hardness of God in leaving them, but the hardness of man in refusing to come.
 - And God's great mercy and grace that He should so work in His elect that they do come...
 - He has to take radical measures, even to give them a new heart.
 - It is for us to worship, not to blaspheme.

TRANS> Charging God with injustice or impotence is a very serious form of blasphemy that many use to justify their continuance in sin.

c. Now let's look at a couple of ways that we blaspheme...ways that we blaspheme even after we have been converted to Christ...

1) We do it when we misrepresent God—for example, when we say that God would be evil to do something that He has in fact done...

- Take those who say that God had nothing to do with the destruction of the world trade towers in New York—or with the recent flooding in Pakistan...
- There are believers that will say that would be wrong for God to do these things—that it is only Satan or the forces of nature.
- This is blasphemy—because God did do these things—using Satan and wicked men and nature as His agents.
 - God is being charged with evil by those who say that it would be wrong of God to do these things.
 - It is not intentional blasphemy, but neither was Paul's blasphemy intentional.

2) We also blaspheme Him when we get angry and charge Him with evil...

- when we say that He has been unfair to us...
- or that He has not thought of us and cared for us as He should...
- or that He has not protected us as He should or has not give us help when He should, or not dealt with our enemies when He should.
- that He does not love us!
 - All of this is blasphemy.
 - He has even given us His Son!

3. You can see why this is such a serious sin!

- It is an assault on God in the only way that we really can assault Him—by attacking His reputation and glory!
- It is man, who is made from dust, setting himself up as judge against his creator, as if he who is created was capable of judging his own maker!

II. Now let's look at some other ways that we may abuse God's name that are brought out in the Catechism.

A. First, there is the ignorant abuse of God's names' attributes, ordinances and works...

- This is what we do when we do not understand God's revelation.

1. In Acts 17, Paul accused the Greeks of worshipping God in ignorance—as if He who made all things needed something from man.
 - He called them to repent of this sin and trust in Jesus Christ.
2. But who among us can claim that we are entirely free from ignorance?
 - We have misrepresented God to others, abusing His name, because we have been wrong about Him in various ways...
 - We have said things in praise of Him that are not true of Him.

B. Secondly, there is the vain abuse of God’s name....

- This occurs when you speak as if God is not important...or as if what He says or does is not important.
1. For example, someone says or thinks that...
 - God doesn’t mind if we cheat on our taxes a little—after-all, our tax system is not very just anyway.
 - This is attributing to God what is not true of Him.
 2. A much more serious way to take God’s name in vain would be that of a false preacher who would say,
 - You are already a good person.
 - You don’t need to ask God to forgive you.
 - You are perfect, just the way you are.
 - Such a man takes all the warnings and even the very death of Jesus in vain.

C. Thirdly, there is the irreverent and profane abuse of God’s name...

- I am treating these together because they are so closely related...
 - When you are irreverent, you speak of God as if He were like us—as common or profane.
 - You speak without due consideration of His majesty and honour as God.
1. You may remember the arrogant boast that was made about the Titanic...
 - That it was so marvellously constructed that even God Himself would not be able to sink it.
 - That was irreverent blasphemy.
 - It was to speak against the power of God.
 2. Elijah blasphemed Baal when he said that perhaps Baal was busy or sleeping or on a journey (maybe he had to use the potty)...
 - but we must never speak irreverently about the living God like this—it would be blasphemous to do so...

- “Maybe God is having a bad day...
 - “Maybe He is too busy to help you...
3. Pharaoh had to learn a hard lesson when he blasphemed in the day that Moses told him that the LORD had commanded him to let the Israelites go, and Pharaoh said,
- “Who is the LORD that I should obey Him?”
 - That was blasphemy.
 - That was profane and irreverent, because he acted as if God were not to be feared.
 - The LORD showed Pharaoh who He was through the Ten Plagues.

D. Fourthly, there is the superstitious use of God’s name.

- The superstitious use of God’s name occurs when we try to use His name in a way that we are not authorised to use it,
 - making a claim upon His name that we have no authority to make.
1. Do you remember how the sons of Sceva attempted to use the name of Jesus in a superstitious way as recorded in Acts 19?
- Acts 19:13: Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.
 - Sometimes, Christians who are not authorised to heal will claim power to heal in Jesus’ name.
 - This is a superstitious use of His name
 - We may ask in Jesus’ name, but we cannot command spirits in Jesus’ name unless we are authorised by God to do so as the apostles and those to whom they imparted the gift of healing were.
2. Another example of the superstitious use of God’s name would be that of the Israelites in 1 Samuel 4 when they brought the ark of the Lord into the battle.
- They supposed that by having the ark present, they would defeat the Philistines.
 - The Philistines were afraid at first, but mustered their courage and actually captured the ark.
 - God cannot be manipulated like that!

- But the Israelites were not as wrong as some Christians who suppose that by some ritual they are saved...
 - You meet them all the time.
 - They have no fruit, but they say,
 - “I have been baptised!”
 - or “I asked Jesus into my heart.”
 - or “I am a member of the church.”
 - Salvation comes by union with Jesus Christ through faith and repentance.
 - Baptism and prayer and church membership are all commanded by God, but simply going through the motions without saving faith does not reconcile a sinner to God.
3. There are all sorts of other superstitious abuses of God’s names that Christians sinfully participate in...
- I have known of those who use rituals not found in the word to protect against demons...
 - or who wear a cross or put one up in their home to protect their home...
 - This is the superstitious abuse of God’s great name.

E. Fifthly, there is the wicked abuse of God’s name.

- That is, when sinful men suppose that they can pray in Jesus name or engage in worship and be accepted by God.
1. In Malachi, there is the example of the men who weep at God’s altar and expect Him to hear their prayers even though they are in the process of dealing treacherously with their wives—divorcing them...
- God will not hear such prayers!
 - Men, do you not know that your prayers will be hindered if you are not dwelling with your wife according to knowledge?
 - If you are being cruel and harsh, negligent, and uncaring?
 - You use God’s name in a wicked way if you expect Him to bless you when you are doing such things.
2. We are warned about the wicked abuse of God’s name in connection with the Lord’s Supper.
- In 1 Cor 5 we are warned about coming to the LORD’s Supper when we have not put away the leaven of malice and wickedness,
 - and in 1 Cor 10 about coming when we are at the same time drinking the cup of demons,
 - and in 1 Cor 11, we are warned about coming when we have not discerned the Lord’s body.

- If there is no repentance in you when you come to the Lord, do not expect him to bless you!
 - To engage in His ordinances without repentance is to wickedly use His name.

- 3. We might add also that calling upon the LORD to bless you in pulling off a shady deal or in winning the lottery or in taking vengeance on your brother (or avoiding him) is also a wicked use of God's name...
 - It is a violation of the third commandment.

TRANS> I trust that you can see what a heinous thing it is to abuse God's name in these ways that we have considered today.

III. Ugly as this sin is, there is forgiveness for it

A. We all have done it, and we all do it.

1. There are times when even the most faithful believer abuses God's name and has to repent.

2. Some of you know of times that you have even blasphemed the Lord and charged Him with evil and unkindness.
 - You have been like Job's wife who called upon Job to curse God and die.
 - You have been like the Israelites when they said they would have been better off to have remained in Egypt than to be with the LORD in the wilderness.

3. What a horrible thing to say to the one who went to the cross for you...
 - But you have thought hard thought like this at times and you may have even said such things!

B. But I want you to know that the LORD is *full* of mercy and grace

1. When you confess your sins, He is faithful and just to cleanse you from all your unrighteousness!
 - Satan is the accuser of the brethren, and he will try to get you to wallow in your sin.
 - He will try to discourage you and cast you down and get you to think that there is no way of escape for you—
 - that you are condemned, that you are cut off from God, that the cross is of no more use to you because you are a hopeless case.

2. But it is not so!
 - The LORD is gracious and He is always ready to pardon you and restore you if you will come to Him.

- He did not die for you because He is hard and implacable, but because He is gracious and kind and gentle and ready to show mercy.
- It is not that you should pretend that your sin is not so bad—
 - It is not that God does not think it is bad—that is not the point...
 - He thinks it is much, much worse than you do...
 - He sees the vileness of it and the depth of it.
- It is a very wicked abuse of His name to suppose that He is not highly offended when you abuse of His name.
 - But the point is that He is ready to forgive—that His Son has paid the full penalty of our sins, as great as they are.
 - That He has done what had to be done to atone for sin that highly offended our righteous God...
 - The cross is our comfort!
 - So bring all your blasphemies and He will pardon them all through the blood of the covenant.
 - Praise be to His name!