

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 113 b

Sinful Cursing & Swearing

Halifax, 12 September 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.

After having spent several weeks looking at **what is required** in the third commandment, last week we began looking at the **sins that are forbidden**.

- In this study, we are spending a lot of time unpacking each commandment because we realise that they are summary statements that are very broad.
 - As Christians who are not under the law as a covenant of works, such that we are condemned, God's commandments are not grievous to us.
 - Instead they are wise instruction from our loving heavenly Father that we warmly welcome, having the Spirit of God at work to write His law in our hearts.
 - As God's children, we yearn to be like Him and to filled with His wisdom in our daily living.
 - Rather than making a big list of rules that we can manipulate, we want to see the fullness of His will that we might obey it from the heart.

With the third commandment in particular, we have seen that when it speaks of taking God's name in vain,

- it is speaking about our attitude and response to our dear heavenly Father, and His Son, and His Spirit...
 - Do we honour Him and love Him?
 - Then we will honour and love and respect all that is associated with Him—
 - His name refers to all that is associated with Him, to all that reveals Him.
 - The exposition in the Larger Catechism takes all of this into consideration.
 - It addresses us about the way we relate to God's name.

Question 113 in particular addresses wrong ways that we relate to God's name.

- This is what it says"

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.*

This week, we want to look in particular at the section that has to do with the use of God's name to back up what we have said...

- It is the part that says:
 - “perjury; all sinful cursings, oaths, vows, and lots; violation of our oaths and vows, if lawful; and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful.”

- On August 8, we looked at the reverent use of oaths, vows and lots,
 - And we saw at that time that there is a proper place for using God's name to back up what we are saying.
 - We saw that **promissory oaths** (in which vows are made) are used to call God to bear witness to an important promise we are making...
 - We ask Him to hold us to the promise and to deal with us if we don't keep it. We are involving His name in our commitment.
 - We properly take such vows when we enter into covenant with God to be His people, when we enter into a public office, when get married, or other such matters.

 - We also looked at **assertory oaths**
 - These are the oaths that we use when we go to court and are asked to assert that we will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.
 - They are used to end disputes.

 - Jesus used such an oath when He was on trial and asserted by the living God that He was the Christ who would come in the clouds to judge.
 - Paul uses them rather frequently in his ministry to affirm the words that he speaks as an apostle.

- Those are proper uses of oaths and vows, but today we are going to look in particular at improper uses of them.

For our scripture reading, I have selected Ecclesiastes 5:1-8.

- READ> Ecc 5:1-7

As you can see,

I. Ecclesiastes 5 teaches you to be very careful about what you say when you come before God.

A. Now of course, everything you say is before God,

1. But when you use God's name in the making of a vow or in affirming what you have spoken,

- You are coming before Him in a special, deliberate manner.
- You are bringing Him into the matter to support what you are saying.
- You are coming before His throne, as it were, to have Him witness to what you have spoken.

2. We have seen that it is right and proper and even required in some cases to make vows...

- but the principle stated in Ecclesiastes 5:5 should always be kept in mind—
 - Ecc 5:5: "Better not to vow than to vow and not pay."
- In other words, you should never use God's name in a casual way to support your speech.
 - I spoke to you before about the contractor who tells you he will be there "first thing in the morning" and then doesn't show up...
 - Because he was careless in his everyday speech, he will be tempted to make an oath when he makes his next appointment...
 - "I swear it—I will be there on Thursday."
 - This is the kind of oath that Jesus tells us not to make.
 - This man is not really mindful that he is coming before God when he starts to swear, but that is precisely what he is doing!
 - He has entangled God's name with his promise!
 - And even if he does do what he says, it is still wrong because he has used God's name without thought...
 - He has taken God's name in vain.
 - He cannot excuse himself by saying that he did not mean it like that—
 - That is the very problem with what He did!
 - He used God's name in a thoughtless manner.

TRANS> You see that in Ecclesiastes 5,

B. The person who is hasty with his words in the making of vows before God is called a fool.

1. He is a fool because he is coming before God,
 - without a proper consideration of the fact that he *is* before God and of what it means to come before God!
 - He is saying things that bring God into the matter,
 - but he is not being careful about it!

2. In particular, this passage seems to be speaking about a time when you are before God in worship and you consciously make a commitment to Him without carefully considering what you have promised.
 - Something like this...
 - a. You are worshipping God and there is a message that stirs you to duty...
 - for example, a message about honouring your parents...
 - And so you resolve right then that you ought to start calling your mother on a more regular basis.

 - b. At the time you make this commitment, you feel quite confident that you will do it.
 - Your heart has been moved, and you are convinced that this is what you ought to do.
 - You have the best of intentions.
 - But then when it comes to actually picking up the phone and making the call—
 - Well, you know,
 - There is a lot to do and you are tired and you have been kind of busy...
 - but you will get to it soon.
 - But in fact, you never do get to it—at least not with any consistency.
 - But as far as you are concerned, you still feel pretty good about yourself because you know that your intentions are right.
 - And you are comforted because you know that God looks upon your heart and He knows that you have good intentions.

- God does know our hearts and He says that they are deceitful and desperately wicked.
 - He knew when you made the commitment that when it came to actually doing it,
 - it would never happen.
- c. You see in our text that the one who makes this empty vow in the presence of God is compared to one who dreams...
 - In your dreams, you envision yourself calling your mom on a regular basis and it seems very easy—
 - There are no difficulties in doing it...in your dreams...
 - You just do it.
 - But when it comes to *actually* doing it,
 - your commitment is not strong enough to go to the trouble and inconvenience.
 - You must not ask yourself before you make the commitment if your heart is willing to make the sacrifice involved in actually carrying it out.
 - If it is not, do not make a commitment!
 - You may think it was okay because you did intend to do what you said,
 - but the LORD is not so impressed with your good intentions.
 - It is easy to serve in your dreams—it is different when you actually have to do something.
 - Eccl 5:7: For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God.

Now this principle about the making of empty vows applies to **all** that we utter before God—whenever we take up His name to affirm what we have said.

- This is never to be done lightly.
 - When it is done lightly, we make God angry and cause Him to chasten us...
 - as verse 7, “Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands?”
- Now that we understand the overall principle,

II. Let me show you some of the specific ways we sin against God in our oaths and vows that are referred to in Question 113.

A. First, there is perjury

1. Perjury is the making of false statements under oath.

- This is what happens in court when a person is called upon to swear that he will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—and then tells a lie!
 - Charles Russell, the founder of the Watch Tower, or the Jehovah Witnesses, perjured himself when he said under oath that he knew Hebrew.
 - They brought a Hebrew Bible and asked him to translate.
 - He could not do it.
 - Then they asked him to identify the letters in the Hebrew alphabet and he could not even do that.
 - In his own mind, you can imagine that he justified himself because he felt that he was trying to uphold a greater cause...
 - but perjury can never be justified.
 - Sometimes a person will justify this in his own mind because he will say,
 - “I was afraid”
 - or “I was trying to protect my friend”
 - or “I wanted to see this person get in trouble because I know he has done a lot of other things that he did not get caught for.
2. But perjury is always a great offence against God and can never be justified.
- Many godly persons who might have saved themselves by lies have chosen rather to die than to sin against the name of the LORD.
 - In Leviticus 19:12, it says:
 - ‘And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.
 - You see here that you profane the name of God when you do this.
 - Do you remember what it means to profane His name?
 - It means that you take His holy name, His holy reputation and make it common or unholy!
 - In other words, you are trashing God’s reputation as if He is one who would affirm your lie!
 - Of course, He will not affirm your lie and you will be judged for it.
 - He will become, as it says in Mal 3:5,
 - “a swift witness” against you.
 - This is no light thing!
 - Whatever consequences you are trying to avoid by your lie cannot possibly be equal to the consequences that will come to you for your perjury!

- But of course, it is not just the threat of punishment that ought to bother you.
 - It ought to bother you that perjury degrades the name of God—
 - the God who made us and who graciously redeemed us and whose name is beautiful and glorious—
 - It is your business and pleasure to promote His name!
 - The last thing you should wish to do is to profane His name!
3. And because using God’s name is such a serious matter—
- you should not swear at all in ordinary speech.
 - Even if you don’t actually use God’s name per se,
 - If you simply say,
 - “I swear” without actually using His name, you have still brought Him into the matter because He is the only one who can enforce the oath.
 - For this reason, atheists or those who swear by false gods also bring God’s name into their oaths so that He will deal with their perjury also.
 - If you have committed perjury,
 - there is only one thing to do—
 - you must confess it to those you have lied to...
 - and you must bear the consequences, whatever they may be!
 - In that way, you do what you can to remove the insult to God’s name that you caused by your perjury.
 - You should want to do that because you love Him and because you fear Him...
 - And of course you must also confess it to Him and ask Him to pardon you,
 - recognising that it was a very grievous insult to Him and that it requires nothing short of the blood of Jesus to atone for it.
 - But take heart, for He is always ready to forgive—
 - He delights in forgiving and it is for you to return thanks to Him.
 - He is your redeemer who blots out your transgression as only He can do, even for perjury!

TRANS> Now let’s move on to consider that second thing that is forbidden related to our use of God’s name to support what we say... and that is...

B. Sinful cursings, oaths, vows, and lots

1. First, let’s look at sinful cursings...

- a. Just what is a curse?
 - 1) Properly a curse is a divine pronouncement upon someone that brings evil upon them.
 - God pronounced a curse upon man and all of creation when we rebelled in the garden.
 - That is what brought death and suffering into the world.
 - In Deuteronomy 27, there is a long list of curses that the LORD pronounces against His people if they do not keep His covenant.
 - This is what actually happened when they did not.
 - 2) A curse has power because when God speaks, that which He speaks comes into effect...
 - When He said, "Let there be light," there was light;
 - So when He says, "You shall surely die," you die.
 - His word is powerful—
 - He spoke the world into being and He can speak curses or blessings into being by His powerful creative word.
- b. But if a curse requires creative power, how is it that men can curse?
 - 1) The scripture speaks of this quite often...
 - When David went out to fight Goliath, we are told that Goliath cursed David by his gods...
 - David was also cursed by Shimei in 2 Sam 16 when he was fleeing from Jerusalem in the day of Abasalom's rebellion.
 - Those two curses didn't have much power...
 - In 2 Kings 2, we have the example of Elisha who was mocked as a prophet of God by some rebellious youths and who cursed those youths.
 - The result was that two female bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them!
 - Here was a curse that had a lot of power!
 - 2) But how can we curse when we do not have divine power in our words?
 - Well this is where God's name comes into the picture!
 - Because we do not have the power to bring the curse into effect, we are invoking God, who alone is able to curse and bless, to do it.
 - This is where the wrong in sinful cursing is found...
 - We have no authority to call down a curse upon anyone that God has not cursed!

- This is what Balaam and Balak learned when Balak called Balaam to curse Israel.
 - Balak said,
 - “Nu 22:6: please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”
 - But instead Balaam kept blessing them—
 - because the LORD would not allow him to curse them.
 - It is really a funny story because Balak keeps trying to take Balaam to different places and he keeps offering sacrifices in hopes that God will change his mind...
 - and in the end he gets angry with Balaam and sends him away without pay.
 - The point is that you cannot curse anyone that God has not purposed to curse.
 - In Proverbs 26:2, it says:
 - Pr 26:2: Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, So a curse without cause shall not alight.
 - All you do is infuriate the LORD when you throw out curses.
 - Your curses accomplish nothing against the one you curse.
- c. It is a great sin to curse anyone without authorisation from God!
- You are acting as if you have the power to tell God what to do!
 - as if His divine power is not holy, but can be used by you at will!
 - God does not look upon such abuse of His name lightly!
 - In fact, He says that He will curse those who curse what He wishes to bless!
 - Children sometimes take it upon themselves in their anger to curse their parents, but listen to the LORD says about that!
 - Pr 20:20 Whoever curses his father or his mother, His lamp will be put out in deep darkness.
 - There is a righteous kind of cursing... when we speak a curse upon what God has purposed to curse...
 - We saw how Elisha pronounced a curse on the mocking youths—this was right and proper for him to do as a prophet.
 - All the prophets spoke curses, in the name of the LORD, and we need to see that their curses will be done because God has authorised them to do this.

- Paul pronounced a curse upon those who would preach another gospel...and so may we...
 - but you have no authorisation to curse someone for cutting you off in traffic!
 - or cursing someone for offending you or cheating you...
 - Such cursing is sinful cursing—it is an abuse of God’s name...
- And make sure you understand that!
 - The primary wrong is not done to your neighbour—but to God’s name!
 - We are to love the name of the LORD, and to revere Him as holy.

2. Now let’s consider sinful oaths

- a. In Hosea, the LORD includes swearing in a list of grievous sins that were being committed by His people when they no longer knew God.
 - Listen to what is says in Hosea 4:1-2:
 - Hosea 4:1-2: Hear the word of the LORD, You children of Israel, For the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: "There is no truth or mercy Or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, Killing and stealing and committing adultery, They break all restraint, With bloodshed upon bloodshed.
 - You see that swearing is right along side murder and adultery.
 - Whenever a society has lost sight of God and His glory, they almost always become careless about swearing...
 - They even start to use swear words to embellish their speech!
 - For example, someone will talk about the damn hurricane...or they will say that it was hot as hell last week.
 - Do you see what they are doing?
 - God is the only one who can bless and curse,
 - and they are taking it upon themselves to declare that a thing is cursed by Him that He has not necessarily cursed!
 - Did God curse the hurricane?
 - Then who are you to call it a damn hurricane?
 - Do you just assume that God shares your opinion about it?
 - Do you dare to declare His holy mind and will in the matter?
- b. Hosea is probably speaking of the same kind of swearing that Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount when He said,

- Matthew 5:34-37: Do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. "Swear not at all."
- We have seen that Jesus is here prohibiting the casual use of oaths to embellish or strengthen your everyday speech.
 - We do not have the authority to damn what God has not damned or to deliver to Hell what God has not delivered to Hell.
 - nor can we label something as damned or Hell bound.
- But I want you to notice something else that Jesus talks about in Matt 5.
 - Jesus also speaks of minced oaths.
 - A minced oath is one in which the name of God is avoided and a person swears by something less directly related to God...
 - There are all sorts of ways people do this...
 - The Jews would swear by heaven (God's dwelling place)
 - or by Jerusalem (the city of God)
 - or by their own head (which Jesus says they have no power to bless or curse).
 - The same thing is still done...
 - People will say, "for heaven's sake"
 - Or "holy smoke..."
 - They will substitute Gee for Jesus,
 - or heck for hell
 - or darn for damn
 - or Gosh for God,
 - or dickens for devil.
 - But we do not have the authority to pronounce God's name or God's curse or any substitute for these over our words...
 - It is not for us either to curse something or to exclaim about it with an oath.
 - These are all sinful oaths.
 - You may not like something, but you have no right to declare that God does not like it.
 - If you hit your finger with a hammer,
 - Is it right for you to suggest that the LORD damns what has just happened? or that He counts it as dung?

- No! You can say, “Ouch,” or “Oh, that hurts,” but you cannot impute to God what He ought to think about the matter.

TRANS> This sort of sinful swearing is very common, but it ought not to be common among Christians.

TRANS> Now let’s move on to look at

3. Sinful vows...

- a. A vow is sinful one in which you swear to do something that is sinful or something that will hinder you from your God-given duty...
 - You have no right to bind yourself, in God’s name, to something that He has forbidden.

- b. There are many examples of such sinful vows in the scripture...
 - 1) You may remember the vow that some of the Jews made when they were in pursuit of Paul.
 - They were angry with him because of the gospel,
 - And in Acts 23:12, we are told:
 - Acts 23:12: And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.
 - There were a couple of reasons this vow was wrong...
 - First, because they bound themselves to kill an innocent man (even though they did not consider him innocent).
 - In this way, they were asking the LORD to verify their promise to do evil!
 - This would be like vowing to take vengeance on someone—by vowing you call God to back up your promise to do wrong!
 - This could also be compared to marrying an unbeliever when you are a believer...
 - You cannot ask God to back up your promises when you are doing something contrary to Him!
 - Second, it was wrong because they did not have the power to do what they proposed to do—
 - This certainly turned out to be the case—
 - They were not able to capture Paul, though they tried.
 - Now that may raise a question from you...

- How can you take vows of obedience or vows in your marriage when you do not have the strength to keep them?
 - You can do this because God promises to give you grace to do these things.
 - You should not vow to do something you do not have a promise or ability to do unless this is understood as part of the vow.

2) Another example of a famous sinful vow is the vow of Jephthah.

- Judges 11:30-31: And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."
- In this case, the vow was sinful because he bound himself to an action that might be unlawful...
 - If a servant or a member of his family were to come out to meet him, he would be bound to offer them to the Lord—an abomination.
 - and it turned out that his daughter came out to meet him!
- This teaches you that you must be careful in your vows.
 - For example, you can vow to submit to someone in authority in the LORD, but you must never bind yourself to obey them no matter what...
 - if they should ask you to do something sinful, you are free from your vow.
- We will say more about Jephthah in a moment.
 - but first, lets look at one more example of a sinful vow.

3) We may also consider the vow that Jezebel made.

- As soon as she heard that Elijah had shamed and then executed the prophets of Baal, she made a sinful vow:
 - 1 Kings 19:2: Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."
- This vow was doubly sinful.
 - First, it was sinful because she vowed to kill a man who was not only undeserving of death, but who was also a faithful servant of the Lord.

- This is wrong in the same way that the Jew's vow to execute Paul was wrong.
 - Secondly, it was sinful because she vowed to the gods instead to the true God.
 - It is always wrong to swear by a god or a king or some other authority who does not have the ultimate authority to bless and curse.
 - Such sinful oaths are condemned in Jer 5:7:
 - Jer 5:7: "'How shall I pardon you for this? Your children have forsaken Me And sworn by *those that are* not gods.
4. Next there is the sinful use of lots...
- a. A good example of this would be Haman's use of lots.
 - Haman wanted to know what the best day would be to put into motion his wicked plan to massacre the Jews.
 - To determine that day, he cast lots—that is pur.
 - You can read about this in Esther 3:7...
 - The LORD frustrated his plans.
 - This is a clear example of a sinful use of lots.
 - b. In casting lots, you are asking the LORD to make a decision for you.
 - And you need to be certain that you are authorised to ask Him for a decision about the matter.
 - If you are not authorised, you are tempting the LORD.
 - You have no right to do that—it is a wicked use of His name.
 - Does this not pertain to playing the lottery or gambling?
 - As we saw before, in the Old Testament, the priests were authorised to cast lots for certain matters,
 - God also commanded His people to divide an inheritance in the promised land which was seen as a direct apportionment from the LORD.
 - But there is no clear authorisation to use them in the New Testament now that we have the complete will of the LORD revealed in scripture.

TRANS> So you see that there are sinful cursings, sinful oaths and vows, and sinful lots...

- In all of these, we presumptuously drag His name into a place that it does not belong!
 - This is a high sin and if we have done it, we need to repent.

- And now there is one other matter we need to consider that has to do with the sinful use of God's name in our oaths and vows...
- C. Third, there is the violating of our oaths and vows, if lawful; and fulfilling them, if of things unlawful.
1. We have seen in previous sermons how important it is to keep what we have vowed.
 - a. We saw that in taking a vow, you are effectively asking God to curse you if you do not do what you have promised.
 - In asking Him to back you up in what you say, you are asking Him to turn against you if you are not speaking the truth!
 - It is not a light matter at all!
 - b. We saw this spelled out a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the right use of vows and oaths...
 - and looked at the example in Nehemiah 10:29 where the congregation:
 - Neh 10:29: joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God's Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes:
 - They recognised that by making a covenant, they were taking a curse upon themselves if they did not do what they promised.
 - As we have seen, Ecclesiastes 5 warns you not to do such a thing unless you really mean it!
 - Ecc 5:1-2, 4-6: Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil. Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few... When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed —Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin,
 - Even Jezebel understood that she was taking a curse upon herself if she did not do what she vowed before her gods.
 - c. As those who love the LORD our God and who have received the riches of His grace and who have been so blessed in His salvation,
 - the very idea of dragging His glorious name through the mud ought to grieve us greatly.
 - No my brothers and sisters, it is for us to love and honour His name!
 - If we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we will also love His name, and this will keep us from breaking our vows.

- If you do not love Him—
 - if that motive has very little weight with you,
 - then pray that He would pour out His Spirit upon you that you might love Him—for this is the great commandment.
2. And notice that is it also wrong for us to fulfill a vow that we have made for something unlawful.
- Remember that I told you would come back to Jephthah’s vow...
 - It was a vow that bound him to an action that was an abomination to God, even the offering of his daughter to God as a sacrifice...
 - He should have repented of his vow.
 - He might, perhaps, have offered something as a substitute for his daughter.
 - But it was wrong for him to add to the sin of making such a foolish vow by keeping it when it involved him in sin!
 - If you have made a vow that entangles you in sin, it is a vow that ought to be repented of, not kept.
 - Of course you have to be careful not to be too loose with your definition of a vow that entangles you in sin...
 - Swearing to your own hurt is not the same as swearing to do something that is sinful.
 - If you swear to your own hurt, you are obligated to keep what you have promised, even if it impoverishes you or causes you great inconvenience.
 - You have brought the honour of the LORD’s name into the matter and because of your love for Him and because of fear and reverence for Him,
 - you are to keep it.
 - Again, we go back to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes where we are told to be careful about what we vow in the first place.
 - If you love that LORD, that is what you will do...
 - in all these matters!