

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
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LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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SERMONS

PREACHED IN THE PARISH-CHURCH OF OLNEY.
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

TO THE INHABITANTS OF THE PARISH OF OLNEY.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

I HAVE principally two motives for publishing these Discourses. The one is, to exhibit a specimen of the doctrine that is taught and most surely believed amongst us, to satisfy those who desire information, and to stop, if possible, the mouth of Slander. I cheerfully submit them to examination, in full confidence that they contain nothing of moment which is not agreeable to the general strain of the word of God, and to the principles of the church whereof I am a minister, as specified in the Articles, Liturgy, and Homilies. And that what I now print is to the same purport with the usual course of my preaching, I doubt not but all who stately hear me, will do me the justice to acknowledge.

My other motive is, a desire of promoting your edification. It is my comfort that many of you live by the truths of the gospel, and highly prize them. You will not, therefore, be unwilling to view the substance of what you once heard with acceptance. But it is to be feared, that the far greater part of the congregation have need to have the things pertaining to their peace pressed upon them again and again, for a different reason; not because they know them, and therefore love to have them brought to their remembrance, but because they have hitherto heard them without effect. For the sake of both, therefore, I am willing to leave an abiding testimony amongst you. I hereby take each of your consciences to witness, that I am clear of your blood; and that, to the best of my knowledge and ability, I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God.

In the choice of the subjects I have selected for publication, I have not been solicitous to comprise a succinct scheme of gospel-doctrine, but have given the preference to such topics, which the peculiar circumstances of the times, and of my hearers, make me desirous might be had in continual remembrance.

The exposition of the third commandment, which was first delivered in your hearing, I afterwards preached (nearer the form in which it now appears) at London; and as it led me to touch on some particulars of a very public and interesting concern, I have given it a place in this volume. And I shall think myself happy indeed, if it may please God to give weight to the

testimony of so obscure a person, with respect to a grievance under which the nation groans.

As long discourses are in many respects inconvenient, I have chosen to publish no more than a brief summary of what you heard more at large from the pulpit. And as I aim to speak plain truths to a plain people, I have purposely avoided any studied ornaments in point of expression, being desirous to accommodate myself to the apprehensions of the most ignorant.

May it please the God of all grace to accompany my feeble endeavours to promote the knowledge of his truth with the powerful influence of his Holy Spirit! And I earnestly entreat all who know how to draw near to a throne of grace by Jesus Christ, to strive mightily in prayer for me, that I may stand fast in the faith, and increase in the knowledge of Jesus the Saviour, and that, for his sake, I may labour, without fear of fainting, in the service to which he has been pleased to call me. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

I am your affectionate friend, and servant in the gospel of Christ,

JOHN NEWTON.

Olney, January 20, 1767.

SERMON XV.

THE EXTENT AND SANCTION OF THE THIRD COMMANDMENT.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. EXOD. xx. 7.

THE foundation of true religion is laid in a right knowledge of God and ourselves. How deficient we are in each of these, how far fallen from original righteousness, is strongly implied in this prohibition, which would be wholly unnecessary, if we were not wholly sunk in stupidity and wickedness. That such worms as we, should be liable to trifle with the Divine Majesty, whose presence fills the heavens and the earth, before whom the angels hide their faces; that such frail dependent creatures have need to be cautioned, that we do not profane the name of the God in whom we live, and move, and have our being, is a striking proof of our depravity; and that we can dare to break through this caution, and slight the awful threatening with which it is closed, is a dreadful aggravation of our guilt.

These words, when first spoken to the Israelites, were delivered in flames and thunder. The mountain shook, the people trembled; and even Moses, who had been honoured with peculiar freedom of access to God, was constrained to cry, "I exceedingly fear and quake," Heb. xii. 22. Such a scene rather an infinitely more dreadful one, shall hereafter take place, "when the Lord himself shall again descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God" (1 Thess. iv. 16.); "when he shall be revealed in flaming fire, to take vengeance on all who know him not, and obey not his gospel" (2 Thess. i. 8.): "then shall sinners be convinced not only of their ungodly deeds, but of all their hard speeches which they have spoken against him" (Jude, 15.). and they shall know the full meaning of that terrible exception which I have read, "that the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."

The terms of my text require little explanation. The name of God is in everyone's mouth upon one occasion or other, in places where his revealed will is known. In a more eminent and peculiar sense, his name is discovered to his believing people in Christ Jesus the Lord; those who know the name of God in Christ will put their trust in him (Psal. ix. 10.); they dare not, they cannot, blaspheme that holy name by which they are called. But I shall take it more extensively here; for though but few understand the name of God in an evangelical and saving sense, there is not a person in this assembly but knows and makes mention of his holy name, so far as to render them transgressors of this commandment. To take his name in vain, is to use it falsely

or profanely, inconsiderately, without due reverence, or unprofitably, and without a suitable necessity. The sanction, "The Lord will not hold him guiltless," has indeed a meaning and emphasis beyond what is expressed. Similar forms of speaking are frequent in scripture, as, "The Lord will not spare that man" (Deut. xxix. 20; 2 Pet. ii. 4, 5.); that is, he will punish him to the utmost; for it is immediately added, "All the curses of this book shall come upon him." Again, "He spared not the angels;" that is, he showed them no mercy, as the following words declare: "He spared not the old world, he visited them with utter destruction, and swept them all away with a flood." So "he will not hold him guiltless," implies two things: 1st, That the Lord God has appointed a day to call sinners to an account for their words, as well as their actions. 2dly, That whatever shall become of others, those who have presumed take his name in vain, have their doom already determined. Whoever escapes, they shall surely be punished; whomsoever he quits, he will certainly condemn them.

As the import of the expressions is not difficult, so likewise it will be far more easy than agreeable to point out some of the many ways in which this commandment is customarily and carelessly broken. The law is general, and each particular precept is spiritual (Rom. vii. 14); and perhaps this will be found of a more extensive signification than some of you are aware. The delightful theme of a minister of the gospel is to preach Jesus Christ, and him crucified; to open the treasures of divine mercy, and to show the grace, freeness, and security of the promises; to raise up them that fall, to strengthen those that stand; "to support the weak, to comfort the feeble-minded; to preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound," 1 Thess. v. 14; Luke iv. 18. But these subjects do not comprise the whole of our message; and in general we find that the full soul loatheth the honey-comb (Prov. xxvii. 7.); and multitudes, through ignorance of the spirituality and purity of God's holy law, and a partial judgment of their own hearts, can neither see the beauty nor the necessity of the gospel-salvation. We are therefore constrained frequently to insist on far less pleasing subjects, to lift up our voices like a trumpet (Is. lviii. 1), to demand a general attention, while we attempt to show our hearers their transgressions and their sins, that they may thereby make the doctrine of the cross of Christ welcome and desirable. It is painful to the patient, and without doubt unpleasing to the human artist, to probe a deep and dangerous wound; but necessity commands, and without it a complete and lasting cure is not to be expected.

1. The first and most direct way in which the name of God is taken in vain, is by perjury; that is, when he is expressly appealed to in confirmation of what is false, or when engagements are made, as in his name and pres-

ence, which are not strictly and literally complied with. I need not take up your time in proving that this is a sin of a deep dye in itself, and attended with peculiar aggravations under the light of the gospel; and I wish it was more difficult to prove the frequency of it in our land, but this likewise is as obvious as the light. I have sometimes met with a random assertion, that though we are wicked enough, we are not worse than other countries. In other things I am content to wave the parallel; but with respect to the sin of perjury, I fear we are much worse than any nation now under the sun, perhaps worse than any that the sun ever saw. I am afraid, there are more and more daring instances of this wickedness amongst us than in all the rest of Europe. By an unhappy kind of necessity, it is interwoven, as it were, with the very constitution of the body politic, and diffuses itself like a deadly contagion amongst all orders and ranks of people. Oaths are so excessively multiplied, and so generally neglected, that it is equally difficult and rare for a person to engage through a course of years in any kind of employment, either civil or commercial, (O that it stopped even here!) without being ensnared. Some are so expressed, that it is morally impossible to comply with them; others so circumstanced that they are usually swallowed without the remotest design of regarding either in whole or in part. If here and there a few make conscience of their engagements, and are desirous to perform to the Lord their oaths (Matth. v. 33), or decline taking such as open a door either to honour or profit, so strong is the torrent the other way, that it is well if they escape the charge of singularity and preciseness. Though wickedness of every kind too much abounds amongst us, perjury is perhaps peculiarly and eminently our national sin; and I tremble to think it is so, for it gives too just a ground to fear the approach of national judgments. Surely all who have any regard for the honour of God, any sense of the worth of souls, will pray earnestly that this iniquity may not be our ruin, but that the Lord would be pleased to inspire and succeed the most proper means for the removal, or at least the mitigation of this evil. This would be an event worthy to stand in the annals of the happy times and auspicious government under which we live.

2. And though the matter of an oath be strictly true, yet if it is not transacted with a serious acknowledgment and homage of that Divine Being to whom appeal is made, such an oath, however lawful and necessary it may be in itself, is, with regard to all such thoughtless triflers, no better than taking the name of God in vain. It cannot but be grievous to every serious mind, to observe the little reverence and solemnity, or rather the total want of common decency, which too frequently prevails among us in this respect, so that sometimes it is not easy to say whether those who tender the oath, or those who take it, seem least in earnest. Without doubt this indif-

ference may be assigned as one cause of the increase and prevalence of perjury. If those who are authorised to require or receive those solemn appeals, were themselves impressed with a due reverence of the awful majesty of God, and were solicitous to inspire all who came before them with the same sentiments, and would remind them (those especially who appear very positive and unguarded) of the impiety and danger of swearing falsely, it is possible many mischiefs would be prevented. Some persons would probably tremble and start back from the first temptation to this wickedness, and others might be deterred from persisting in it, who, for want of such admonitions and examples, and because they never saw any solemnity observed, precipitately rush upon this enormous evil, and are at length given up to a dreadful habit of wilful and corrupt perjury.

3. If an oath, lawful and necessary in itself may thus become criminal through inconsideration, what shall we say of the throng of profane swearers, who wound our ears and pollute our language, by a horrid mixture of execrations and blasphemies in their common conversation? “Their throats are an open sepulchre: their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness: the poison of asps is under their lips,” Rom. iii. 13, 14. This I have to say from the word of God, that the Lord will not hold them guiltless. In vain their thoughtless plea, that they mean no harm: in vain their presumptuous comparison of themselves with others, as though these were trivial escapes that did not affect the peace of society. If these were small sins singly, their frequency would swell to a vast amount; but is it indeed a small sin, to rush against the thick bosses of God’s buckler, and to despise so terrible a threatening as this? Surely “the plague shall never depart from the house of the swearer.” “As he clotheth himself with cursing like as with his garment; so it shall enter into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones,” Ps. cix. 17, 18. A habit of swearing is a sure sign not only of an unsanctified heart, but of a conscience hardened, and as it were seared with a hot iron, callous, and quite insensible.

4. Some persons who scruple expressly to mention the name of God, accustom themselves to swear by his creatures, by the heavens, by the light, or by their own souls, &c. But that this likewise is a direct violation of the law, and exposes to the same penalties, we are assured by him who best knew how to explain his own commands. Our Lord determines this point in his sermon on the mount, so as not to leave the possibility of a doubt. “I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is his footstool.—Neither shalt thou swear by thy head because thou canst not make one hair thereof white or black,” Matth. v. 34–36. “And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein; and he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne

of God, and by him that sitteth thereon," Matth. xxiii. 21, 22. "But let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil." This decision evidently condemns, not only what is usually deemed swearing, but the whole multitude of idle expletives, whether fashionable or vulgar, which have the force of affirmations in common discourse. Will any who live in a Christian country, and have the Bible at hand, think to plead ignorance of these things in the great day?

5. If I should stop here, some of you would applaud yourselves, and perhaps not be displeased with me for what I have hitherto said. Some who think themselves clear thus far, will join with me in saying, "Because of swearing, the land mourns," Jer. xxiii. 10. But are there no other ways of taking the name of God in vain? Yes; many do it as often as they pray; and it is easily proved against numbers who join in our established worship. Let each one consider with what dispositions and desires they have engaged in the service we have already gone through this day. Our mouths have all spoken the same things; but have they been the language of our hearts? In the confession, we acknowledge, that there is no health in us, and speak as if we were true penitents. In the communion-service, we cry for mercy as miserable sinners; we pray that the thoughts of our heart may be cleansed by the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit; that we may perfectly love him, and worthily magnify his holy name, and for this we appeal to God, as to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. More than a few of you, at certain seasons, publicly declare, that the remembrance of your sins is grievous, and the burden of them is intolerable. Now, what apprehensions can such of you have of God as can dare to use this solemn language when your hearts meant no such thing? Is not this to take his name in vain in the grossest manner? Is it not plain that you think him altogether such a one as yourselves (Psal. 1. 21.); nay, more easily imposed upon, and more safely to be trifled with, than a fallible mortal? Strange it is to think, that many can, not only content themselves with this lip-service, but make it the meritorious ground of their hope, and conceit themselves religious because they come so often to church to mock the power that made them! But hardly can any wickedness be imagined more daring, and more dreadfully provoking to the Most High, than such a religion as this. To all such worshippers I may address those striking words of St. Peter to Ananias, "Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God," Acts v. 4.

6. The whole lives of those who live in the allowed practice of known sin, under the profession of the Christian name, may be considered as one continual breach of this command. In all you say and do, you blaspheme that holy name by which you are called; and still more so if you are de-

clared friends and favourers of evangelical preaching. By your means, “the ways of truth are evil spoken of,” 2 Pet. ii. 2. You give occasion to those offences of which it is said, “Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh,” Matth. xviii. 7. You injure the cause of Christ, stumble the weak in the faith, grieve the hearts of all who love the Lord, and make his enemies rejoice. “Better it would have been for you never to have known the ways of righteousness” (2 Pet. ii. 21.), than thus to abuse your knowledge. You are now mingled with his faithful servants, as the chaff is blended with the wheat upon the floor. But “behold the Judge standeth at the door,” James v. 9. His fan is in his hand, he will thoroughly purge his floor; and when he gathers the wheat into his garner, you will be consumed like stubble before the flame of his indignation, Matth. iii. 12. What distress and remorse will seize your hearts, when you shall see them with whom you have often joined in the same ordinances, that have lived with you under the same roof, dined at the same table, perhaps slept in the same bed, when you shall see them received into the kingdom, and you yourselves excluded, and thrust into that outer darkness, where there is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth for ever? Luke xiii. 28.

From this subject we may observe, by way of inference and application,

1. The truth and propriety of that scripture, “We know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God,” Rom. iii. 19. What person in this assembly can plead guiltless to every part of this charge? Must we not all stand silent and self-condemned? And if you are a transgressor, what can you do, either to repair the dishonour you have opened to the Divine Majesty, or to prevent the contagious effects of your own evil example? Nothing can be more false, than a too frequent form of speech amongst us; when a man of some amiable qualifications in social life tramples without fear upon the laws of God, how often is it said, by way of extenuation, he is no one’s enemy but his own! when indeed his practice declares him to be an enemy of God, an enemy to his holiness and government: and he is a most mischievous enemy to all who live under his influence, and within the circle of his acquaintance, by tempting and encouraging them to sin to the hazard of their souls. Things standing thus with all men by nature, with what language can we answer the law’s demands? Must we not adopt the pathetic confession of the prophet? “For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are dim. The crown is fallen from our heads; woe unto us that we have sinned!” Lam. v. 16.

2. The necessity and value of the gospel; otherwise how can you escape the penalty, and stand acquitted before the supreme Judge? If you refuse this, “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins,” Heb. x. 26. But if you

humble yourself, and apply to Jesus, there is yet hope. He died for sinners, the chief of sinners, and the greatest of sins. For his sake, all manner of sin and blasphemy is pardonable: "He is able to save to the uttermost." But he must do the whole, and have all the glory. Believe in his name. This is the first step; without grace derived from him, you can do nothing. Remember his agony and bloody sweat, his cross and passion; and that he is now exalted a Prince and a Saviour, on the behalf of those who are ready to perish. Let this be your plea and encouragement to draw near to a throne of grace. Pray for his Spirit to reveal his righteousness, power, and love to your souls; and as your knowledge of him increases, your repentance will be more spiritual, evangelical, and effectual. Entreat him to enable you to forsake your former evils, to set a guard upon the door of your lips, and to inspire you with an awful veneration of that holy name which you have hitherto profaned. He can teach your polluted lips to show forth his praise.

And let the redeemed of the Lord, whom he has delivered from the guilt and power of this iniquity, adore the grace and mercy that has saved them. Look back upon your past lives, and rejoice with trembling. How often have you defied his vengeance and power, and perhaps madly uttered horrid imprecations against yourselves? Why have others been cut off in these sins, and you spared? Yes; "such were some of you: but ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God," 1 Cor. vi. 11. And now your tongues, which once uttered blasphemies almost with every breath, or, under a form of godliness, pronounced a language foreign to your hearts, delight in extolling the name of Jesus, and celebrating the wonders of redeeming love. Now, when you speak of the great God, your hearts are awed with an apprehension of his majesty, yet comforted with the thought that this God is your God, your almighty friend, your everlasting portion. Now you feel the influence of the Spirit of adoption, whereby you cry, "Abba, Father." Little did you think in the days of your ignorance, that the God whom you was presumptuously offending, had, in the counsels of his everlasting love, chosen you to salvation by Jesus Christ, Eph. i. 4. But he was found of you when you sought him not, Isa. lxxv. 1. He passed by you when you were lying in your blood, and bade you live, Ezek. xvi. 6, 8. This was the secret reason why you could not destroy yourselves. And at length his time of love came, the hour which he had appointed to open your eyes, to show you mercy, to deliver you from the power of darkness, and to translate you into the kingdom of his dear Son, Col. i. 13. Do not your hearts glow with a sense of your obligations to him who hath loved you, and washed you from your sins in his own blood? Will you not live to him who has saved, you from so great a death? Yea, doubtless you will count all things but loss for the excellency

of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord. You will use all your influence to diffuse the savour of his precious name. You will take shame to yourselves, and ascribe glory to him. You will be zealous for his cause, and have a tender compassion for poor sinners, who know not what they do, remembering, from your past experience, the misery and gall of an unconverted state. Let as many of us as have received mercy be thus minded; let it be our great study to show forth the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light, till the welcome hour shall arrive, when he will say to all who fear and love him, and long for his appearance, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," Matth. xxv. 34.