Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

If you were doing a quiz and the question was: Which one of the Ten Commandments is the only one that gets two Lord’s Days in the Heidelberg Catechism? What would your answer be? Which Commandment, in your mind, would merit two, whole Lord’s Days? Well, if you were paying attention a few moments ago, you will know that the answer is the 3rd Commandment – Lord’s Days 36-37. But would that have been your guess? When you think of all of the moral and ethical issues that exist in the world, why two Lord’s Days for the *3rd Commandment*? Isn’t the 3rd Commandment pretty straight forward? Do not use God’s name in vain – do not blaspheme and instead, use God’s name with reverence and awe. So, why the extra Lord’s Day about oaths?

Well, once again, swearing oaths was a hot topic in the time of the Reformation. For example, you had priests who had taken a vow of lifetime celibacy. So did they have to keep those vows? It was also quite common for people to make vows in the name of saints or angels. A famous example is Martin Luther. Once, during a storm, he promised Saint Anne that if she preserved his life, he would become a monk. And he did survive the storm and he did become a monk. So did he have to stay a monk for the rest of his life? But there were also those who taught, on the basis of what we read earlier in Matthew 5, that making any sort of oath was forbidden. And these sorts of issues were why the 3rd Commandment got an ‘extra’ Lord’s Day.

But that was then and this is now, as they say. How might we take the Lord’s name in vain, today? May we make oaths, and, if so, when and how? And, of course, what does all of this have to do with the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ?

Well, let’s seek our answers from this passage in Jeremiah 4. For what we see in these words is that **a person who loves the Lord will be a sincere swearer**. And we will see this as we consider three points: The **attitude** of the person addressed, the **activity** of the person and addressed, and the **assurance** given to the person addressed.

But before we consider those three ‘A’s, just a few words about the Context.

After King Solomon’s reign, the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms – Israel in the North and Judah in the South. And Jeremiah prophesied during the reigns of the last five kings of *Judah* – from Josiah to Zedekiah.

* And **chapters 2-6** are his first ‘sermon’ to Judah, delivered during the time of King Josiah. And his message was simple: Around 100 years before Jeremiah wrote these words, the people of the Northern Kingdom had been sent into exile because of unrepentant wickedness. So Jeremiah said to Judah, you saw what happened to your northern sister, so you must repent of your sins or the same thing will happen to you!
* Now, back in **chapter 1:2**, we read that Jeremiah prophesied in the 13th year of King Josiah’s reign. And we learn from 2 Chronicles 34 that it was the 12th year of his reign that he began to cleanse Judah of idols. And this was a good thing to do; it was an act of repentance or reformation. But how deep did it run? Would it last? Would it be continued in every area of the life of God’s people? That is the context of our text.

1. And that bring us to our first point and the **attitude** of the person addressed. We see it in verse 1: “*If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me you should return*.”
   1. At the end of chapter 3, Jeremiah has the people calling out to the Lord in repentance: Look at **verse** **25**, “*Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonour cover us. For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God*.” And that sounds really good, doesn’t it! They sure sound sorry for their sins. But as we come to **verse 1**, the Lord is saying, I have heard this many times before. Your bare words are not enough. I see your lips moving but where is your heart attitude?
      1. I met someone the other day who has lived a life of rebellion for many years. And recently this person apologized to their parents for their many acts of rebellion. And I asked the person, were your parents glad to hear you say this? And the person said, Well, they have heard me apologize many times before. So they want to see if I have really changed. And I am sure that each one of us can remember times when we said sorry without really meaning it; without really being committed to changing our behaviour.
      2. Well, way back in **Deuteronomy 28-29**, God laid out the blessings and curses of His covenant law. And He said to Israel, If you abandon me for idols, I will allow you to be taken into exile. But He also said this: When you have been sent into exile, if “*you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey Him … then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where He scattered you …*” So if the people sincerely returned or turned back to the Lord, He would bless them again. And what does the Lord ask here in **4:1**? “*If you return to me* …” So the Lord wanted to see if the words of **3:22-25** came from an attitude of true, sincere repentance.
   2. And this is why the essence of the Lord’s call here in Jeremiah is that word ‘**return**.’ The word return implies turning around and coming back. And the Lord said, Return *to me*. So the picture here is of Judah having gone to be with someone else and needing to turn back towards the Lord.
      1. It is what the prophecy of **Hosea** is all about. Hosea was told to marry a prostitute, knowing that she would be unfaithful to him. And each time she was unfaithful, Hosea would go and find her with another man and bring her back to their home. And in doing this, Hosea was a picture of God with faithless Israel. God was like a husband who had to say to His adulterous wife, Return to me! Come back to me. Turn your affections back to me!
   3. It is a shocking and almost unthinkable picture, isn’t it. How could the people of Judah be so faithless? How could they turn their back on God and seek happiness in the worship of idols and in sexual immorality and greed and injustice – spiritual adultery? And how could they do this after God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land? But brothers and sisters, even as we think those thoughts, are we any different than Judah?
      1. And, truth be told, we have less reason to be faithless than the people of Judah! We have been rescued from slavery to sin by the blood of Christ! We have received the permanent, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit! We have the full Bible – Old and New Testaments! We have the guarantee of eternal life in heaven! But still we sin; we give in to temptation and we engage in idolatry and sexual immorality and greed and many other sins beside.
      2. It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul lamented the reality of remaining sin in his life in **Romans 7**: I do what I do not want to do and I do not do what I want to do! “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* He knew that all sin is spiritual adultery.But what he did he do in his turmoil? Where did he go? He returned to the Lord: “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord*!”
      3. Is this your attitude? Do your return to Christ every time you sin? Do you humble yourself in confession and repentance? Do you meditate on the cross and the empty tomb and fill your heart with Christ Jesus?
2. So the **attitude** of the person addressed in our text is toward the Lord; it is a relationship that is chiefly in view. But we see, secondly, that this **attitude** is accompanied by **activity**. In **verses 1b-2a** we read: “*If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, 'As the LORD lives,' in truth, in justice, and in righteousness*.”
   1. So this is what the Lord wanted to *see* as evidence that the people of Judah had really returned to Him. And because our focus today is the 3rd Commandment, we will just look at the words in **verse 2**: “*And if you swear, ‘As the Lord lives,’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness*.”
      1. Now, I am sure that you boys and girls have been taught that swearing is bad. And it is bad; we should not use bad language. But the swearing in view here is different; it is when you make a promise or a vow or an oath, using the Lord’s name. The most obvious example is in the courtroom. When you give evidence in court, you have to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And we also make vows in the Lord’s name when we get married or with baptism and the public profession of faith. And that is what Question and Answer 101 is about – we are allowed to swear an oath in God’s name if we do it reverently, when the government demands it, or when necessity requires it. This is what we are calling sincere swearing.
      2. But why was the Lord wanting to see sincere swearing from the people of Judah? Well, we see why in **chapter 5**. Look at 5:1: “*Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her. Though they say, "As the LORD lives," yet they swear falsely*.”
         1. So there was lots of promise-making and oath taking and vow-making in Judah, and it was all done ‘in the name of the Lord,’ but no one meant it. People made oaths and promises with no intention of keeping them. And there was lots of worship in Judah, but it was an empty, formulaic, going through the motions. As one commentator puts it: “Although the common people had God’s name on their lips, they did not have His glory on their minds … For all their religious talk, they refused to follow God. [Even] their worship was false because they did not give glory to God in their hearts.”
      3. So what needed to change for the Lord to know that His people had returned to Him? Well, they needed to be devoted to Him, exclusively. And they needed to keep their vows and promises and oaths. And when they took the name of the Lord to their lips in worship, it needed to be matched by a genuine and sincere desire to glorify God.
3. And this is where we need to transition into our last point, which is the **assurance** given to the person addressed. And we see this in the last part of **verse 2**: If the people of Judah returned to the Lord and demonstrated this by sincerely swearing, “*Then nations shall bless themselves in Him, and in Him shall they glory*.”
   1. Now, if you know your Old Testament history, you will know that the people of Judah did repent while in exile and the Lord did restore them to Jerusalem. So there was a return to the Lord. But was it a *perfect* obedience? No. Did it atone for the previous failures of many generations? No. And did the people quickly fall back into the very same sins that had seen them taken into captivity? Sadly, yes. So their efforts to obey the 3rd Commandment would never be enough to bring blessing to the nations! In fact, all that the 3rd Commandment could do was demonstrate their guilt and sinfulness.
   2. And it is the same for you and me, today. We too are commanded not to misuse the name of the Lord.
      1. But do professing Christians commit the sin of blasphemy or misuse the name of God today? Yes they do. Whether it be by blatantly using the names of God in a blasphemous way or with substitute words like ‘jeez’ or ‘OMG,’ which is short for ‘Oh My God,’ or even something like ‘holy smoke,’ we are misusing God’s name or making His attributes common with our carelessness.
      2. And do professing Christians break promises and vows made in God’s name? Yes they do. They do this when they fail to be the husband or wife that they promised, in the Lord’s name, to be, or when parents fail to instruct their children in the way of the Lord, which they promised, in the Lord’s name, to do, or when a spouse abandons a marriage without a biblical reason, despite their vows, or when a person leaves a church for the wrong reasons, despite their vows.
      3. And every time we fail to keep a promise or we go back on something we said, even if we did not vow in the Lord’s name, we sin against the 3rd Commandment. And this is because with us, as the Lord’s people, our yes is supposed to be yes, and our no is supposed to be no, as Jesus said.
      4. But we break the 3rd Commandment also when we sing Psalms and Hymns or recite the creeds in here, while we are mentally reviewing last night’s rugby game or what we are going to cook for dinner when we go home, or a hundred other things. I even fall into this sin myself when leading in congregational prayer. It is so easy to be saying the Lord’s name while thinking about something else. It’s so easy to sprinkle our prayers with the Lord’s name without using it, each time, with reverence and awe. And I am sure we all know how easily and how often we do this.
      5. And then Answer 99 says that we also share in blasphemy by being a silent bystander, which means we hear others blaspheme but we say nothing about it. Would anyone here like to count how often they have been a silent bystander to blasphemy? I wouldn’t.
   3. So we have to ask: **How is this part of verse 2 fulfilled then**? How do the nations bless themselves in Him? How do they glory in Him if it is not by the obedience of Judah or our obedience to the 3rd Commandment? Well, the answer is in the word “*Him*.” For the “*Him*” that the nations bless themselves in and glory in is the Lord Jesus Christ.
      1. You see, this is ultimately why the people of Judah were brought back from exile; so that the Lord Jesus could be born from among the people of Israel. And only He perfectly obeyed the 3rd Commandment. Only He swore ‘As the Lord lives’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, always. Only He kept every promise and vow. Only He meant every word in worship. Only He always used the holy name of God with reverence and awe. So He was the true Israel; He was the true prophet, priest, and king that all of the prophets and priests and kings of Israel pointed forward to, including Jeremiah and Josiah.
      2. But not only did He perfectly obey the 3rd Commandment, He also died on the cross to pay for all of our 3rd Commandment sins.
      3. So the 3rd Commandment brings us to the cross and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. You see, the right use and the best use of the Lord’s Name is what we read earlier in **Romans 10:9-10**: “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved*.”
      4. Have you done this? Have you called on the name of the Lord in this way? Have you confessed all of your 3rd Commandment failings and received the forgiveness of your sins? For this is where true blessing is found!

Well, what we have seen today is that the **attitude** of the person who goes from the 3rd Commandment to the cross is relationship with God by faith in Jesus. And the **assurance** given to such a person is that their sins are forgiven in Christ and they possess eternal life. And these two things, together, will produce godly **activity** in such a person.

I wonder, have you ever asked someone for their autograph? Author/sportsperson/celebrity? In my study, I have a baseball signed by all of the members of the 2006 Chicago Cubs baseball team. And some people earn a huge living by buying and selling autographed items. Why do we do this? It is because the name of some people can be valuable and meaningful.

Well, this is what we read about God in the Psalms: “*I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High*.” “*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*” “*Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God*.” People of God, there is no autograph more valuable than the one written in blood on the cross of Calvary. In fact, as **Philippians 2:9-11** says, “*God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*.” And this is why blasphemy is so wicked! And it is why we ought to be those who “use the holy name of God with reverence and awe, so that we properly confess Him, pray to Him, and praise Him in everything we do and say.” May the Spirit of the Lord help us to do this. Amen.