Theme/concept

Third Commandment: “Do not take God’s name in vain.” The great accusation against the church is hypocrisy—“play-acting” or pretending at faith. God’s reputation in this world often rides on his people. In Malachi, the priests dishonored God by offering imperfect sacrifices that cheapened his name. We guard God’s reputation by leading lives consistent and congruent with faith.

Application

We honor the Lord with pure speech and faithful living.

Icebreakers

1. Did your parents name after a relative or someone important, or give you a name with special meaning? If you have children, did you give them names that hold special significance?

2. When growing up, did you or your siblings like to play-act or pretend to be someone else, perhaps a movie star or fairy tale character? Who did you like to pretend to be?

Reflections on the sermon

Looking back at your notes from Sunday’s message, what appealed to you about Luther’s Garland of Four Strands?
Background/Context

The third commandment warns against taking God’s holy name lightly as part of swearing an oath. This was perceived as such a serious offense that in Judaism, YHWH—the personal name God revealed to Moses—was not pronounced, lest the speaker inadvertently misuse the name. It was spoken only by the high priest as he gave the blessing on the Day of Atonement. The third commandment also warns against hypocrisy, appearing to be someone you are not. In Malachi, the priests seem to be performing the holy duty of offering acceptable sacrifices. But God accuses them of hypocrisy because they bring him imperfect sacrifices. Sadly, we often see this in the church, as some who claim to belong to God live in a way that contradicts the teachings of Jesus.

Charge

For the Lord’s honor, walk the walk of faithfulness.

Scripture

Exodus 20:7 (NLT)

You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.

Exodus 20:7 (CEB)

Do not use the Lord your God’s name as if it were of no significance; the Lord won’t forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

Malachi 1:6-14 (NLT)

The Lord of Heaven’s Armies says to the priests: “A son honors his father, and a servant respects his master. If I am your father and master, where are the honor and respect I deserve? You have shown contempt for my name!

“But you ask, ‘How have we ever shown contempt for your name?’

7 “You have shown contempt by offering defiled sacrifices on my altar.

“Then you ask, ‘How have we defiled the sacrifices?’

“You defile them by saying the altar of the Lord deserves no respect. 8 When you give blind animals as sacrifices, isn’t that wrong? And isn’t it wrong to offer animals that are crippled and diseased? Try giving gifts like that to your governor, and see how pleased he is!” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

9 “Go ahead, beg God to be merciful to you! But when you bring that kind of offering, why should he show you any favor at all?” asks the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

10 “How I wish one of you would shut the Temple doors so that these worthless sacrifices could not be offered! I am not pleased with you,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “and I will not accept your offerings. 11 But my name is honored by people of other nations from morning till night. All around the world they offer sweet incense and pure offerings in honor of my name. For my name is great among the nations,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.
“But you dishonor my name with your actions. By bringing contemptible food, you are saying it’s all right to defile the Lord’s table. You say, ‘It’s too hard to serve the Lord,’ and you turn up your noses at my commands,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “Think of it! Animals that are stolen and crippled and sick are being presented as offerings! Should I accept from you such offerings as these?” asks the Lord.

“Cursed is the cheat who promises to give a fine ram from his flock but then sacrifices a defective one to the Lord. For I am a great king,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “and my name is feared among the nations!

Breaking down the Scripture

1. In the Malachi passage, how have the priests dishonored God’s name with their speech and their conduct?

2. How does misusing God’s name affect God’s reputation? How does it affect your reputation?

3. What messages are the priests sending to God when they offer defective sacrifices?

4. What do the priests’ actions say about the altar of the Lord?

5. In Malachi 1:10, what does God mean when he tells the priests that he wishes they would shut the temple doors?

Going deeper

1. In Isaiah 43:6b-7, why did God create his people? How well have the people fulfilled God’s purpose?

2. In Luke 10:20, in what are we to rejoice? What does that tell us about God?

3. In Malachi, who are the “other nations”? Why would they want to make God’s name great?
4. Following Luther’s Garland of Twisted Strands,
   • What does the Malachi passage teach about how we should use our lips and our lives?

   • What should we be thankful for?

   • What should we confess to God?

   • How should we pray to God regarding our lips and our lives?

**Taking action:**

1. How might you use Luther’s method of teaching, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer?

2. How can you use your speech and actions to honor God, who created you and calls you by name?

3. What might walking the “walk of faithfulness” look like for you?

4. How are you “play-acting” or pretending at faith? Do your actions speak louder than your words?

**Closing prayer**

Pray as a group:

• That members would help one another honor God’s by their words and lives

• That members would regularly thank God for revealing his name, and for calling us by name.
• That the Holy Spirit would show group members where hypocrisy is tarnishing God’s reputation
• That members will confess and repent from the ways they dishonor God
• That members would ask the Holy Spirit to empower them to align more with God’s character