

Introduction

Several years ago, a department store ran an ad for a new fall coat captioned "**Casually Yours.**" It claimed: "**This coat captures beautifully the fine air of informal unconcern. It's 'casually yours.'**" I quote that ad because its language goes to the meaning of the Third Commandment in Exodus 20:7. When it comes to God, we shouldn't be "**casually yours.**" We should be "**seriously yours**" and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Name of God

I read about a felon who turned himself in to police after 28 years on the lam. He was tired of using aliases and wanted to die with his name, Sylvan Carter, on his tombstone. Nothing is more personal to people than their names are, which makes them vital.

The Third Commandment is about "**the name**" of God. Suppose that you, not your parents, had chosen your name. What would it be? Mine would be either Moses or Zechariah. What we can only suppose, God did. He chose His personal name and revealed it in Exodus 3:13-14. It's "**Yahweh,**" which our English Bibles translate "**LORD,**" in capital letters.

The Old Testament uses two other Hebrew words to designate God. One is *EI* along with its plural *Elohim*, which are translated "**God**" in our English Bibles. The other is *Adonai*, which is translated "**Lord**" (small letters). The Third Commandment has those designations in view as well.

In light of what the New Testament teaches about Jesus, what the word "**name**" connotes extends beyond Yahweh, God, and Lord to the name "**Jesus**" and the designation "**Christ**" as well. We all know why. It's because Jesus is the Second Person of God, the Son.

Don't Take It in Vain

Now, notice what verse 7 commands, "**You shall not take the name**

of Yahweh your God in vain.” The Hebrew word translated **“in vain”** mean **“worthlessly”** or **“lightly.”** So, the Third Commandment prohibits using the names and designations of God casually or carelessly.

This prohibition was directed to a common practice of ancient Jews. They'd swear that what they said was true. They often did so to manipulate people into doing or giving what they wanted. So, a person swears, **“As God lives, I'll pay you back if you loan me the money.”** The swearer is using a designation, **“God,”** as a tool to manipulate someone. He knows it will make him or her more likely to loan him the money. He's using it casually in other words, not attributing to it the respect it deserves. The context in which it's used isn't worthy of it.

Bible commentator C.F. Keil explained the meaning of verse 7 in those terms. It prohibits **“trivial swearing in the ordinary intercourse of life.”** That is the letter of the law when it comes to the Third Commandment – what it specifically prohibits.

But there is also a spirit of the law that extends beyond what is specifically prohibited. That spirit of the law is people using the names and designations of God to express themselves *to others*. They're impatient, frustrated, angry, happy, surprised, and so on, and use a name or designation of God to express to others the way they're feeling.

Examples abound. One of the most frequently used declarations in situation comedies, for instance, is **“Oh, my God.”** Two people violate the spirit of the Third Commandment every time that occurs: the writer who wrote the script and the actor who spoke it. Or not long ago, I heard an exasperated father tell his fidgety son, **“Jesus, Austin, settle down!”** He violated the spirit of the Third Commandment when he did. So did a disgusted husband who asked his wife, **“Good Lord, why would you buy something like that?”**

Those people used names and designations of God to dramatize *to others* what they were thinking and feeling. That context is not worthy of those names and designations, which means they violated the spirit of the Third Commandment.

Do Take It Seriously

We now know the negative side of the Third Commandment. Don't use names and designations of God casually or carelessly. But there's a positive side as well. Robert Schuller wrote, "**The Ten Commandments are ten positive prescriptions.**" He was right. Each of the Ten has an implied positive side. That side of the Third is, "**You shall take the name of Yahweh your God seriously.**"

Tony Campolo picked up an evangelist at the airport and was driving him to the church at which he was speaking. As he drove over a hill, he was overwhelmed by the splendor of the valley below it and blurted out, "**God, how beautiful.**" The stuffed shirt evangelist immediately chastised him for swearing and breaking the Third Commandment. To which Campolo quickly replied, "**I was talking to God not you.**" He was telling Him how this valley He created made him feel. He took His "**name**" seriously in doing so. The context, praise, was worthy of it and thus He was keeping the positive side of the Third Commandment.

Recall times when you spoke a name or designation of God. So you addressed God in prayer, "**my Father.**" Or you sang "**O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder.**" Or you told someone, "**Jesus is the greatest and best.**" Or you declared "**God, how beautiful**" when you saw a brilliant sunset. Or you displayed a bumper sticker that says, "**Jesus is Lord**" and drove as if He is. Notice what you did. You spoke names or designations of God to express things you were thinking or feeling *to Him* or *about Him*. That context is worthy of His names and designations, which means you were keeping the positive side of the Third Commandment.

So there you have it – the meaning of the Third Commandment. It's a negative restriction. Don't take God's name casually or carelessly. It's also a positive prescription. Do take it seriously.

Take God Seriously

But the meaning of the Third Commandment goes beyond how we

“take” His name to how we **“take”** Him.

In his book titled *Names*, Paul Dickinson points out that some names seemed predictive of what people would do. So, Joe Bunt became a college baseball coach. Dan Druff became a barber. Jeff Treadwell became a podiatrist. William Payne became a dentist. And two men with the last names Goforth and Ketchum actually became police officers and partners. Notice the link between name and activity (what they did).

But with Yahweh, it's the link between name and nature, what He is.

In our cultural context, names are essentially personal labels that identify people, but tell us nothing about them. They don't because the people themselves or their lives aren't reference points of their names. I have a nephew, for instance, named Mickey. My brother, a rabid Yankees fan, named him after Mickey Mantle. His name, Mickey, tells us nothing about either him or his life.

But that isn't true of God's name, Yahweh. His nature is the reference point of His name. The Hebrew word **“Yahweh”** means **“I am who I am,”** or **“I will be who I will be.”** It conveys that He is self-existent. He has the power of being within Himself. He always has been, is, and always will be. That, more than anything else, distinguishes Him from every other reality. It conveys that He's an utterly unique and utterly superior kind of reality. Yahweh, therefore, is more than a personal label that identifies God. It reflects Him. It expresses the very core of His being.

Please grasp what that implies. How we take His name, we take Him. The Third Commandment is about more than our posture toward God's name. It's about our posture toward Him.

First, it forbids us to take Him in vain. The caption of the department store ad I mentioned helps us define taking Him in vain. It's a posture toward God that says to Him, **“I'm casually yours.”** Recall the language that ad used, **“informal unconcern.”** That's what the Third Commandment prohibits – informal unconcern about Him.

Writer Arthur Suelz explains it well: **“So much of life seems to fit**

into that air of informal unconcern. Even in my search for deeper spiritual roots, God keeps getting shoved into that category – the category of spare time, something to think about after I’ve taken care of important things, if I have time and energy left over. All those things Jesus said get put into the same basket with Sunday football or TV or sleeping in.”

Think of it this way. An article was written about a Broadway actress who said she always consulted her horoscope. When asked if she believed in astrology, she replied, “**I believe in everything—a little bit.**” That’s what the Third Commandment prohibits – believing in and committing to God “**a little bit.**” Do not take God causally! That’s the other negative side of this commandment.

But there’s a positive side as well. Do take God seriously! We take Him seriously by doing two things.

First, we make Him the primary object of our thought.

Our thoughts are what Dallas Willard called our “**lifescape.**” As our senses present a backdrop for our body and its actions, so our thoughts present a backdrop for our will and our life as a whole. Nothing, therefore, reveals our character more than this: what we think about when our mind isn’t necessarily occupied.

Imagine something. A computer chip in your brain records everything you think about when your mind isn’t necessarily occupied. And every night, you take it out, put it in your computer, and print out a list that records each thing you thought about that day and how much time you spent thinking about it. I wonder. What things would appear most consistently on your daily lists? And how much time would be consistently spent on those that did?

That helps us understand what it means to make God the primary object of our thought. When our mind isn’t necessarily occupied, we think about Him, in terms of frequency and time, more than anything else. Thomas Watson expressed this so beautifully: “**The first fruit of love is the *musings of the mind upon God.* He who is in love, his**

thoughts are ever upon the subject. By this we may test our love to God. What are our thoughts most upon?" That's an instructive question. What are our thoughts most upon? We should make it God.

We make it God by doing two things. First, study Scripture, creation, sermons, and other sources and learn as much as we can about Him. Second, purposefully set our mind on those details as much as we can. Doing that trains our mind so that it eventually and naturally thinks about Him more than anything else.

We take God seriously by doing a second thing. We make Him the primary object of our concern. A concern is something to which we direct our attention (focus) and intention (action).

Consider a sampling of the activities, experiences, and events of real life, good and bad. Promoted or fired. Win or lose. Succeed or fail. Praised or criticized. Healthy or ill. Boom or bust. Married or divorced. Rich or poor. Insured or uninsured. Whatever the activity, experience, or event is, good and bad, we can have multiple objects of concern. To take God seriously means that we always make Him the primary of those. We direct our attention and intention, our focus and action, first and foremost to pleasing Him and causing others to esteem Him.

A Christian I knew, a chemist for General Tire, got a big promotion and huge pay raise. His biggest concern, he told me, was how he could use that position and money for God. A Christian I knew was diagnosed with leukemia. His biggest concern, he told me, was dying in a way that would show others that Jesus is the greatest and best.

Conclusion

That then is how we ultimately keep the Third Commandment. We make God the primary object of our thought and concern. We're able to truthfully say to Him **"I'm seriously yours"** if we do.