



## Seize the Day: Keeping the Sabbath Holy—Part 1

By Pastor Doug Batchelor

**An Amazing Fact:** During the Paris Olympics in 1924, Scotsman Eric Liddell, a celebrated sprinter, was expected to win gold in the 100 meters. However, he discovered that the time trials for his event were going to fall on a Sunday, which he believed to be the Sabbath. (While

he had the wrong day, he did have the right attitude about the Sabbath.) Even though he had relentlessly trained and his country had invested in him, he refused to run. This decision put him under immense pressure from politicians, teammates, and even some family. “God will understand,” they said. “Your country is counting on you! Do it just this one time!” But he said, “No. I can’t do it—not even once.”

Well, it turned out that Liddell could run in another event that did not conflict with his beliefs—the 400 meters. During the time trials, he didn’t perform well. Teammates wondered about his ability to secure a medal. But Liddell believed the results were in God’s hands, and just prior to running the final, he was handed a slip of paper from an American with a profound message on it: “Those who honor me, I will honor.” When the gun sounded, Liddell ran like he was possessed and broke the standing record to finish first!

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Eric Liddell firmly believed in obeying God no matter the cost—and that meant following every one of His Ten Commandments, including the fourth.

For him the Sabbath commandment was no less important than the ones that say, “Do not murder” and “Do not commit adultery.” It’s very difficult for most people to wrap their minds around that idea, but I also believe it is absolutely true. Very few people, after accepting Christ, dispute nine of the Ten Commandments, but the fourth they often see as a “personal preference” or optional commandment. But it’s not just a recommendation from Moses; it’s the law of the Almighty.

The Bible tells us, “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). The devil doesn’t care whether your sin is adultery or murder or Sabbath breaking, just as long as he can get you to sin and separate you from God.

He knows that in God’s view the Sabbath commandment is not any less important than the other nine. That’s why I believe it is the devil’s plan to erode our convictions through

rationalizations and compromises so that when the big test of the last days comes, when we must choose whom we will worship on penalty of death, many people will have been so trained to compromise that they won't be prepared to take a stand when it matters most. That's why it is important now to be faithful in keeping the Sabbath holy; it's all about preparation.

## What Is Holy?

Let's first take a look at the commandment itself, found in Exodus 20:

Remember the Sabbath day, *to keep it holy*. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it (vv. 8–11, emphasis added).

God says there is holy time; what does He mean? The word “holy” means something “dedicated, set apart, or consecrated to God.” And it's clear from the Bible that some things are holy and should not be profaned or treated as common.

For one, marriage is called holy. You can court someone for years, but it's not a holy relationship until you seal the covenant and marry him or her. Profaning that holy relationship is a violation of the commandment against adultery. Tithe is also called holy (Leviticus 27:30). It can be hard to grasp that among the ten \$1 bills in your pocket, one of them is considered holy, but nonetheless, using that dollar to make a car payment profanes something sacred.

Well, God also points out in this commandment that a certain amount of time each week is holy—not because a church teaches it, but because He said so. No man in the world can call common what God has called holy. Nor does God say, “Remember the Sabbath *to make it holy*.” We can't make it holy; God is the one who makes something holy. In this commandment, He is saying, “I've already made it holy, so you must recognize what I have done and respect Me.” Keeping the Sabbath holy is all about a love relationship with God.

## A Dangerous Topic

I tackle the Sabbath with some trepidation because of how easy it is to be misunderstood, to appear to be extreme and labeled legalistic. In the time of Jesus, two fanatical religious groups struggled for supremacy, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They were, for lack of better words, the liberals and the conservatives of their day. The Sadducees didn't believe in angels or resurrection; that's pretty liberal theology. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were so meticulous in their Sabbath-keeping, they set rules to ensure you didn't walk too far on Sabbath, at least according to their calculations. They had thousands of such manmade rules about the Sabbath and other religious duties.

Jesus often battled with the Pharisees regarding Sabbath observance; He would heal somebody that day and then be accused of breaking the Sabbath. While the commandment certainly doesn't forbid healing on the Sabbath, and Jesus, God Himself, did it, we should also realize that Jesus never said, "You don't need to keep the Sabbath anymore." Every debate He had about the Sabbath was about how to keep it holy, not whether to keep it.

Interestingly, the spiritual problem in the time of Christ was certainly more about legalism. But before then, in the time of Jeremiah and Isaiah, Sabbath problems were more like the problems we face today. The Jews in their time were largely ignoring the Sabbath, not keeping it any better than the pagans. They were being careless in their Sabbath observance. And that's the crisis I perceive in the Christian community at large today: We treat God's commandment with sloppy indifference.

As a pastor, I'm not just writing to you. I'm writing to the Batchelor family. My wife, Karen, and I are constantly educating and reminding ourselves about what is right and what is not right on the Sabbath. We are living in such a relentlessly busy culture that it takes thought, planning, and effort to rest. I confess that at times I've failed to keep the Sabbath holy—so this isn't about judging you; rather, it's a Bible study for people who love the Lord. It's not legalistic to love the Lord and want to please Him by showing you're serious about keeping the Sabbath day holy according to His commandment.

Don't let people accuse you of being legalistic because you're asking practical questions about what a person should and shouldn't do on the Sabbath. That's our purpose here.

## **Finding Out How to Keep It Holy**

The Ten Commandments are, in some ways, an abbreviation of the law of God. For instance, when it says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain," the commandment doesn't go into great detail to explain every possible way in which a person could take God's name in vain—whether it's swearing, using God's name carelessly, or claiming you're a Christian but living as a hypocrite. The details of the law require our further study, and you'll find examples of this commandment being honored or disregarded in other places in the Bible.

In regard to our goal of better understanding the fourth commandment, we also need to look at the specifics of Scripture through a prayerful study of Bible principles.

For example, in Hebrews 4:11, we read, "Let us [a-bor] therefore to enter into that rest." This sounds like a contradiction, but that's really what happens when we prepare for the Sabbath. We invest additional labor so that we might enjoy the blessed rest of the Sabbath more fully. While I'm not comparing the Sabbath with a typical vacation, if you're going to have a good vacation, it does require extra work, planning, and preparation to make it happen.

I believe that in order for us to really enjoy the release and peace that God has designed for this holy day, we must labor to enter that rest. And this involves educating ourselves. God throughout His Word gives us a lot more details about what is involved in keeping the Sabbath holy. As we'll see, it does not mean that you simply swing in a hammock all day long, drinking pineapple juice through a straw. There's a lot more to God's rich rest!

Of course, the fourth commandment is the longest of all the commandments—precisely because it goes into the most detail. It says people are to rest, their animals are to rest, their servants are to rest—everybody within their gates.

The Sabbath commandment is also somewhat different from most of the others because it makes statements in a positive and a negative sense. Most of the others are only stated in the negative—“thou shall not.” The Sabbath commandment says, “You *shall* keep it holy” and “you *shall not* work.” It gives both sides, and so I’m approaching this message in the same way. Now, let’s get started ...

## **Preparing for the Sabbath**

John Wesley tells a story about a new convert to Christianity who was very devout. As the sun was going down before the Sabbath, the man was shining his shoes for church the next day. It took him about 15 minutes to do each shoe. Well, he got one shoe done, but when he saw the sun in the sky, he knew he couldn’t finish the other one, so he put it away.

Did he make the right decision? He went to church the next day with one shiny shoe and one scuffed shoe. Would you call him a fanatic? I believe to call this fanaticism is to misunderstand the principle that some time is declared holy by God. We think, “How can it be okay to be shining one shoe but then after a few more ticks of the clock, it’s suddenly a sin?”

Well, in a similar way, a young man might know a girl and be very fond of her, but it’s inappropriate for him to gaze upon her unclothed form or to be with her intimately, and vice versa. But after they make some vows, suddenly what was once a sin is now holy and good. So yes, little things, like the tick of a clock, can separate holy time from regular time.

In our churches, many of us have become very sloppy, saying, “Oh, the sun is down, but I’ve still got a few more dishes to do.” Why stop mowing the lawn at sundown when you only have a few rows left to mow? “It’s not that big of a deal ... right, God?”

Yet what could happen is that your neighbor drives by and sees that the sun is down and you’re still mowing. What message are you sending to your family and your neighborhood? In your mind, the devil is saying it’s not a big deal. In the mind of the witness, the devil is calling you a hypocrite. It is part of Satan’s game to highlight our inconsistencies and to erode our commitment. Please don’t let him use you as a pawn in his game.

## **What Is Your Attitude?**

Does God want us to dread the Sabbath? No! He wants it to be a blessing. But if we don’t have a love relationship with Jesus, we’ll be watching the clock. When the Sabbath approaches, we’ll be thinking, “Oh, heavens! I’ve got all this stuff to do. Is it Sabbath already? Now I don’t have time to do it.” That’s not the attitude God wants us to have. It’s as if the Sabbath is a burden rather than a blessing.

And who hasn’t heard a young child say, “Is it still Sabbath?” They’re looking for the moment they can do whatever they want. I’ve even caught myself looking wistfully out the window and

wondering if the Sabbath is over so I can get on to my next project. I'm ashamed of having done that. Should we have that kind of attitude?

It means we need a change in our hearts. The Bible tells a story in which this very thing was a problem. In Amos 8:5, we read about people saying, "When will the New Moon be past, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may trade wheat?" They were waiting for the sun to go down and the Sabbath to be over so they could do their own thing.

Suppose a young man is smitten by a young woman, but because of their schedules, they can only spend a few hours a week together. He arranges his schedule to get all of his business aside, but while they're together, she's talking to him and he doesn't seem to be paying attention. As they're walking together, she says, "You seem like you're a thousand miles away."

He confesses, "Well, you know, I'm thinking about the work projects I've got this week." Or if they're sitting together over a dinner that she's spent time preparing and he keeps looking at the clock saying, "Is our date over yet? You mind if I leave early?" What would that say about his heart? Would that hurt her feelings? His attitude indicates something is wrong with the relationship.

We want the Lord to have our hearts, and when He has our hearts we won't be asking those kinds of questions about the Sabbath. God wants the Sabbath to be a delight. And I believe the more we come to know God, the more delightful the Sabbath will become.

The Sabbath is a time for rest, so it should start and end with peaceful worship. There ought to be decisive beginnings and endings too—we should "guard the edges" of the Sabbath. We shouldn't be scrambling around an hour after the Sabbath has begun and saying, "Well, I guess we should stop and have a little prayer." Instead of really worshiping, singing, and reading something of substance, we're in a state of panic. It takes effort and planning to give God the honor He's due.

Why push God to the last minute anyway? If I'm getting on a plane, I like to get there early. If I'm going to wait, I don't always want to wait at home. And that's the way it is with the Sabbath. When it's coming to an end, don't be watching the clock and saying, "Blow the horn! It's over! Let's do our own thing." That's the wrong attitude. It's an insult to God.

If you keep the Sabbath with your heart, you might be accused of being legalistic and Pharisaical and fanatical, but it will always be worth it in your relationship with God. Jesus is the one you are seeking to please.

*In the next issue of Inside Report, we'll delve into practical ways you can keep the Sabbath.*

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