

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!

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 [la-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.

Seize the Day: Keeping the Sabbath Holy—Part 2

By Pastor Doug Batchelor

An Amazing Fact: A Cornell University study confirms the detrimental effects that work-related stress can have on families. Married couples with children and burdened by long hours of work report the lowest quality of life among couples. Additionally, 43 percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress, and at least 75 percent of all physician office visits are attributed to stress-related ailments, according to the American Psychological Association. Stress is also linked to the six leading causes of death in the United States: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide.

Before Moses approached Pharaoh to seek liberation for Israel, he met with the oppressed Hebrew leaders. During this meeting, Moses encouraged the people to consecrate themselves to the Lord and told them that God was about to deliver them from slavery with a mighty hand.

The Israelites had been laboring seven days a week to maintain their heavy workload for the Egyptians. But after this meeting, they evidently decided to renew their covenant with God and began resting again every seventh day. A furious Pharaoh said to Moses, “Ye make them rest from their burdens” (Exodus 5:5). The angry king knew that he must do something drastic to keep the slaves under his control, so in an effort to crowd God from their thoughts, he drowned them further in rigorous labor and increased their workload. (See Exodus 5:7, 8.)

Well, God is about to do great things for His people again. Soon they will be delivered from the slavery of sin and journey to the heavenly Canaan. And, once again, as God is now trying to turn the minds of His people toward the importance of the Sabbath rest, the devil is seeking to drown this generation in work and stress.

Most people in the world don't understand the dire consequences of breaking the fourth commandment. Even many Christians believe the Sabbath is just a day where you put in your two hours at church and then go to a football game, visit the mall, or mow the lawn. But is this trend a biblical one? How is a Christian to keep God's Sabbath day holy?

In part one of this series on the Sabbath, available [here](#), we looked at having the right attitude about this precious day of rest. In this second part, I'd like to consider the practical ways of keeping God's holy day holy.

Avoiding Extremes

Before sharing some specifics on how to keep the Sabbath, I want to highlight a couple of extremes that can distort our thinking on how to honor this distinct day.

When Jesus was on this earth, the Pharisees taught people to keep the Sabbath in an extremely legalistic way. They went so far as to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath! Of course, Jesus never did anything that violates the Sabbath commandment as outlined in Scripture.

Christ did break some of the Pharisees' manmade traditions regarding the Sabbath. He said, "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8 NKJV). Just before this, Jesus explained, "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Worship and the Sabbath are intimately connected. Mankind's traditions should never set aside or eclipse God's requirements.

With that in mind, let's now consider some biblical guidelines and activities to truly keep the Sabbath day holy.

A Time for Worship

The Sabbath is a day for us to come together in corporate worship. Notice how the Lord speaks about coming together for worship on Sabbath. "It shall come to pass that ... from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me" (Isaiah 66:23 NKJV). In another place the Bible says, "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation" (Leviticus 23:3 NKJV). A "convocation" is an assembly or gathering of people.

There are lots of examples in Scripture that show Sabbath is a day for corporate worship. One of my favorites is, "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24, 25 NKJV, my emphasis). Not only do we come together to worship the Lord, but also to encourage one another.

A Time to Study and Hear the Word

We can also find references in the Bible that encourage us to focus on the Scriptures on the Sabbath. We've already noted Jesus' example of going to the synagogue "as His custom was" (Luke 4:16 NKJV). But it also adds, "He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written ..." (v. 17). On the Sabbath, Jesus read from the Bible, the Old Testament book of Isaiah, when He announced His ministry. The Scriptures are an important part of our worship experience. This can be seen in the early church as well—"On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:44 NKJV, my emphasis).

A Time for Prayer

Obviously, it is good and right for us to pray every day. But, once more, the Sabbath provides us a special time to engage in focused worship, study, and prayer. The Sabbath is "holy" time because it is set apart by God. We are to be "holy" because we are chosen by Him to be holy, and we become holy by taking time on God's holy Sabbath to be with Him in a unique way. Here is how some in the early church worshiped on Sabbath: "On the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there" (Acts 16:13 NKJV).

A Time for Relationship and Rest

Putting it quite simply, Sabbath is a day for quality time with God. If there's a day that we should especially walk closely with God, the Sabbath is that day. It was set aside for us to grow in our appreciation and love toward the Lord. You cannot really know someone well unless you spend time with that person. It's the same with God.

Sabbath provides uninterrupted time with God. The rush of work, of paying bills, of attending school functions, of cleaning the garage, and so many other things are set aside so we can nourish our relationship with Him. It's a day to not be burdened by the cares of life— isn't that wonderful? If something gets between ourselves and Jesus, then we know it is probably not helping us worship God on the Sabbath; it's an activity best left undone.

A Time for Giving

Sabbath is also a day for giving. It's a time for bringing our gifts to the Lord. Even though we can bring offerings to God on any day of the week, from a practical standpoint, it makes sense to bring such gifts when we come to worship on the Sabbath. The Bible says, "Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!" (1 Chronicles 16:29 NKJV). Giving is an act of devotion and worship.

When you go before a king, it is customary to take a gift. It is considered impolite to approach a monarch empty handed. The very audience of a king is a great privilege. When the wise men went searching for Jesus, they brought gifts. Likewise, Sabbath is a day we come before the King of the universe, and it should be in our hearts to bring an offering.

Preparing for Sabbath

One of the most important aspects of the Sabbath commandment is summarized in the word "remember." We shouldn't forget about the Sabbath during the week so that we only remember it when the sun is cresting the horizon Friday evening. We can get ready before that happens! Let's look at some ways to prepare for Sabbath.

The Christian writer Ellen White suggests, "On Friday let the preparation for the Sabbath be completed. ... The Sabbath is not given to the repairing of garments and the cooking of food, to pleasure seeking or any other worldly employment. Before the setting of the sun let all secular work be laid aside and all secular papers be put out of sight" (Child Guidance, p. 528).

On my desk at home, I've got all kinds of items I'm dealing with from my workweek—bills, projects, official papers, etc. When Friday comes, I stack them up and put them away. You know what would happen when you saw these projects Saturday morning—you'd automatically start thinking about them! They are less of a distraction if they are covered or put away.

What about cooking? Exodus 16:23–26 speaks about doing your Sabbath food preparation in advance. How should we understand this text? First of all, it's not a commandment that you eat cold food on the Sabbath. The principle is that whatever you can get done ahead of time, do it for your own sake. Yet while ensuring your meals are a wholesome delight, the Sabbath should not be dedicated to elaborate culinary activities. This protects the sacred hours for rest and quality time with Jesus.

A Day for Doing Good

We can become so focused on what not to do on Sabbath that we neglect the good things we can do. Jesus once spoke to a group of Pharisees who asked Christ if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. He answered, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:11, 12 NKJV).

Sheep still fall into pits today. There will sometimes be unforeseen circumstances that arise on the Sabbath that call for our attention. If a woman goes into labor on the Sabbath, should we tell her not to "labor" that day and to wait to have her baby on another day? When people are suffering on the Sabbath and it is within our abilities to help them, shouldn't we have a heart for them, even more than for an animal stuck in a ditch?

However, sometimes in an effort to explain or excuse our actions on the Sabbath, we casually cite our deed as being "an ox in the ditch." (See Luke 14:5.) There are other references in the Bible to donkeys and sheep falling into pits. What

does it mean? When an urgent need comes to our attention on Sabbath, we should pitch in and help someone out of a difficulty. For instance, one Sabbath my son Stephen and I were driving home from church when we came up on a dangerous scene. Someone's car had stalled in the middle of an intersection, and everyone was driving by just honking at him. Steven and I looked at each other, pulled over, jumped out, and helped push the car off to safety.

But raking the leaves in your front yard, or even your neighbor's yard, does not qualify as an unexpected emergency. This is the reason God wants us to remember the sacredness of the Sabbath all week long.

A Day Not to Waste

True, the Sabbath is a perfect time for physical rest and rejuvenation, especially if you're involved in manual labor during the week. But some take the "resting" part a little too far. Missing Sabbath worship because we are "sleeping in" doesn't draw us closer to God, nor does it qualify as spiritual rest. God has called us to His throne; don't sleep through that opportunity!

Another way to reduce our vigor on Sabbath is by gorging food. This can actually dull our minds and fatigue our bodies, keeping us from better things. Sabbath meals should be made memorable and even include a simple treat, but that doesn't mean we need 20 different entrées from which to choose. Often, we eat so much on Sabbath, especially at potlucks, and then want to find the nearest hammock and snore away the hours. Don't get stuck in that net!

The Purpose Is Jesus

Sabbath is a blessed time given to us as a gift. We need it so that we can pause from our regular work and focus on the Lord. It is a unique time for worship, Bible study, prayer, and fellowship with other Christians. It is also a day for healing and cheering others, especially those who are suffering. Sabbath is a day for visiting the sick and those in prison. It is a day to put away our own busy agendas and think about others.

Most of all, it is a day to set aside distractions so that we can sit at the feet of Jesus. It is not a day full of rules that make it a burden. Sabbath is to be a de-light because it draws us closer to the One we love, Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you have not spent much time thinking about practical ways to keep God's Sabbath holy. I would encourage you to make a commitment right now. Say, "Lord, help me to keep Your day holy." I believe that when you choose to keep the Sabbath and place God first in your life, He will make you holy, just as He made the Sabbath day holy.