

HOW TO KEEP THE
Sabbath
Holy



DOUG BATCHELOR

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BY _____
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HOW TO KEEP THE **Sabbath** *Holy*

By Doug Batchelor

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During the Paris Olympics in 1924, Scotsman Eric Liddell, the son of a missionary and a celebrated sprinter, was expected to win gold in the 100-meter race. However, he discovered that the time trials for his event were going to fall on a Sunday, which he believed to be the biblical Sabbath.

Even though he had relentlessly trained and his country had emotionally and financially invested in him, he absolutely refused to run in a race on that day. This difficult decision put him under immense pressure from politicians, teammates, and even some friends. “God will understand,” they pleaded. “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 later turned out, providentially, that Liddell could run in another event that did not conflict with his beliefs: the 400-meter run. However, during the time trials, he didn’t perform very well. Teammates wondered about his ability to secure even a bronze medal. But Liddell believed the results were in God’s hands; all he needed to do was do his best.

Then, just prior to running the final heat, he was handed a slip of paper from an American trainer with this profound message written on it: “Those who honor me, I will honor” (1 Samuel 2:30). When the start gun sounded, Liddell went off like a shot, ran like lightning, 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. This deep faithfulness and devotion is to be admired; even if he had the specific day wrong, he had the principle right.

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 some people to wrap their minds around that idea; “After all,” they say, “It’s just a day!” But I also believe it is absolutely

true that this commandment is as equally important as any other. Very few people, after accepting Christ, dispute nine of the Ten Commandments, but the fourth they often see as a “personal preference” or an optional commandment. But it’s not just a recommendation from Moses; it’s the very 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 idolatry 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 about the Sabbath 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 stumble that they won’t be prepared to take a stand. That’s why it is so important to be faithful now in keeping the Sabbath holy; it’s all about preparation.

But before we delve too far into the hows of keeping the Sabbath holy, let’s first begin by determining what it means for a day to be holy ...

What Is Holy?

Let’s start our study of the Sabbath by taking a careful 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, my emphasis).

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 one dollar among every ten dollars of income you earn is considered holy by God, but nonetheless, using that sacred 10 percent to make a car payment profanes something God has declared to be sacred.

Well, likewise, God also points out in the Sabbath commandment that a certain amount of time each week is holy—not because a particular church teaches it, but because He said so. No man in the world can call common what God has blessed as 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 the fourth commandment, He is saying, “I’ve already made it holy, so recognize what I have done and respect me.” Keeping the Sabbath holy is all about a love relationship with God.

The Sabbath Before the Commandments

Did you know that the fourth commandment takes us all the way back to Genesis?

“Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Genesis 2:1–3).

The Sabbath was not made only for the Jews but for all humanity. This is why Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27). He is referring back to the time of the garden of Eden; the Sabbath was made for all mankind.

The idea that the Sabbath was first presented at Mt. Sinai is a common misunderstanding.

Exodus 20 might be where we hear God first speaking the fourth commandment—in fact, He hasn't even written it down in stone at this point—but it is in Exodus 16, a few chapters *before* the commandment is actually spoken by God, that the Lord rains down manna from the heavens six days a week. On Fridays, the Israelites were to collect twice as much manna because there would be no manna raining down from the sky on the seventh day of the week. God was treating the Sabbath as if it was something the Jews already clearly understood. When some of them went out on the Sabbath looking for bread, God responded, “How long will you refuse to keep my laws?” He was calling the Sabbath a law before they ever arrived at Mt. Sinai.

Does mankind need rest? Yes! This principle comes from the very beginning. Some believe that because the Bible is silent on something, it must not have existed. Yet because you don't read a lot about the Sabbath in Genesis, it's no reason to assume that it wasn't there or didn't exist. Still, it's quite obvious that it was there when God rested on the seventh day and hallowed it at the creation. In fact, there is no spoken or written commandment before Mt. Sinai that says we're not to commit adultery, but Joseph acknowledged that adultery was a sin even before God wrote it in the Ten Commandments. It's clearly stated in Genesis 39:9. And, of course, it was a sin for Cain to kill Abel long before God said, “You shall not murder.”

Also take notice—when you look at the Ten Commandments, how many of them involve the word “keep”? “Remember the Sabbath day, *to keep* it holy.” The commandment does not say, “You shall not keep adultery.” There is one place in the commandment dealing with idolatry that says “showing mercy unto thousands that love me and keep my commandments.” But that's really a general phrase for all of the commandments. So the only law that specifically uses the word “keep” is the Sabbath commandment. It seems strange, then, that it's really the only commandment that much of the Christian world says is no longer an obligation to keep. But as we've seen, it was there in creation at the beginning. And the Bible promises it's going to be in the New Earth (Isaiah 66:22, 23). God wants us to keep it now—it is an eternal, holy gift to all creation!

A Dangerous Topic

Unfortunately, it is easy to be misunderstood or to appear to be extreme when someone is committed to Sabbath observance—it might even be 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 manufactured many intricate rules to ensure you didn’t walk too far on Sabbath or carry anything that might be considered a burden.

For instance, I understand that devout Pharisees carried a ball of string they would unravel to measure off the distance they travelled to ensure they would only walk the appropriate distance on any given Sabbath. They didn’t want to carry a burden on the Sabbath day either, and if you carried a handkerchief to blow your nose on the Sabbath, it was a burden and you were considered to be working. So they got around their own rules by sewing the handkerchief to their clothes. They’d blow their nose on the hankie, which was now considered a part of their clothing. It doesn’t sound very good to us to blow our noses on our clothes, but they figured at least they wouldn’t be carrying a burden! They had hundreds of such manmade rules about the Sabbath and other religious duties.

Well, 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 responded to His accusers by saying, “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* or not 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 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 conscious thought, planning, and effort to really rest. I confess that at times I've neglected to keep the Sabbath the way I should—so this isn't about judging you; rather, it's a Bible study for all people who love the Lord and want to do His will. 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.

So 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—to ask realistic questions that help us get closer to God's will for our lives.

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, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God 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 (Exodus 20:7).

The commandment that says to not commit adultery is pretty brief (see Exodus 20:14). But I think you and I know there is a lot more to that one statement than a commentary on husband and wife. What else does it involve? How about two people who aren't married having sex? Is it adultery then? You must invest a little practical study and understanding in how to rightly obey the adultery commandment when you're married and when you're not married. As Jesus clearly teaches, it's broader than the summary statement you find etched in stone. So the details of the law require our further study, and you'll find examples of this commandment being honored or disregarded in other ways in many 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 study of Bible principles.

For example, in Hebrews 4:11, we read, “Let us [labor] therefore to enter into that rest” (KJV). Laboring to rest? That sounds like a contradiction, doesn’t it? 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 family 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 the Sabbath 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, sipping pineapple juice through a straw. There’s a lot more to God’s rich rest!

Of course, the fourth commandment is also the longest of all the commandments—precisely because it goes into the most detail. It says that people are to rest, their animals are to rest, their servants are to rest—everybody within their gates, their borders of authority, are to rest and enjoy the fruits of the Sabbath day.

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

Preparing for the Sabbath

John Wesley tells a good story about a devoted new convert to Christianity who was hurrying to shine his shoes just before the Sabbath. It took him about 15 minutes to do each shoe. Well, he got one shoe done, but realized the sun would go down before he could finish the other one, so he put it away.

Did he make the right decision? He went to church the next day with one bright, shiny shoe and one dull, scuffed shoe. Would you call

him a fanatic? Maybe even a Pharisee? I believe to call this fanaticism is to misunderstand the principle that specific time is declared holy by God. We think, “How can it be okay to be shining a shoe one moment, but then after a few more ticks of the clock, it’s suddenly a sin?”

Well, in a similar way, a young man might have a girlfriend he is very fond of, but it’s inappropriate for him to gaze upon her unclothed form or to be with her intimately. But after they make some vows before God in a wedding ceremony, suddenly what was once a sin is now holy and good. So yes, little things, like the tick of a clock or saying “I do,” can mean all the difference between holy and common.

In many of our Sabbathkeeping homes, we have become very sloppy, saying, “Oh, the sun is down, but I’ve still got a few more dishes to do.” And why stop mowing the lawn at sundown when you only have a few more passes to make to complete the job? “It’s not that big of a deal ... right, God?”

For one thing, what is your unbelieving neighbor thinking as he 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.

And most important, God is watching. So it truly is better to leave something common undone than to defile the edges of the Sabbath.

What Is Your Attitude?

Does God want us to dread the approaching 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 instead of enjoying time with Him. When the Sabbath nears, 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.” It’s as if the Sabbath is a burden rather than a blessing. That’s not the attitude God wants us to have. God wants us to eagerly look forward to the Sabbath.

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,

right? I've even caught myself looking wistfully out the window at twilight and wondering if the Sabbath is over so I can get on with 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 mentions that this very thing was a problem even in Old Testament times. In Amos 8:5, people say, "When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat?" They were waiting for the sun to go down and the Sabbath to be over so they could do their own thing.

Well, let's 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 concluded, but while they're together, she's talking to him and he doesn't seem to be paying attention. As they're walking side by side, she says, "You seem like you're a thousand miles away."

He confesses, "Well, you know, I'm thinking about my next work project I've got coming up this week."

Or what if they're sitting together over a dinner that she's spent time preparing and he keeps checking the text messages on his phone or 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 words and 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 and love God, the more delightful the Sabbath will become.

The Sabbath is a time for rest, so it should start and end with peaceful and biblical 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 what we're doing and have a little prayer." Instead of really worshiping, singing, and reading something of substance, we're in a state of hurried panic.

True, it does take a little more effort and planning to give God the honor He deserves. If a great king were coming to visit our home, we

would plan how to prepare for his entrance and receive him with honor and respect. Jesus, our true King, said He will come again. We want to do all we can to be ready to welcome Him when He returns, right? Well, every Sabbath we have a chance to practice welcoming our King as He comes into our homes to bring us a blessing.

Why put off God to the last minute anyway? When catching a plane, I like to get to the airport early. If I'm going to wait a little while, I would rather wait at the terminal, packed and ready to go, than to wait at home and fret over whether some traffic problem is going to make me miss my flight. I say be ready early! And that's the way it is with the Sabbath. When it's coming to an end, don't watch the clock, blow the whistle, and announce, "It's over! We can finally do our own thing now." That makes Jesus feel like you're in a hurry to show Him the door.

Remember, 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 fact, let's take some time to see how God's people honored Him over their own self-interests and in the face of persecution and the doubts of those around them ...

Daniel and King Darius

I once watched a Muslim friend excuse himself from our lively game of racquet-ball, find a corner in the middle of a crowded health club, roll out a prayer rug, and begin praying toward Mecca. Although it might have seemed odd to most people, the devoted man knew it was the time for his prayers—and he did not care what anyone else around him thought. He was more interested in what his god thought.

Similarly, in Daniel chapter 6, we read about a political law that required an entire nation to pray to King Darius for 30 days; those who refused faced a grizzly execution. This meant that the Jews in the land were legally forbidden to worship their Lord, but Daniel had a custom he was not about to break. Three times a day he'd go to an upper room in his house, kneel down, and, in front of an open window, pray and give thanks to God. He always faced toward

Jerusalem, as Solomon said, so passersby would know the identity of the God he worshiped (see 1 Kings 8:48).

When the law was enacted, Daniel had to make a choice—to obey an earthly king or to obey God. But what we sometimes miss in this story is that Daniel had actually made the choice a thousand times before when he boldly and openly prayed to his God in a pagan land. It was his custom. So even though he risked getting torn limb from limb by ravenous lions, it was his custom to honor God with his regular devotions.

He could have compromised—perhaps even just a little bit. How easily he could have said to himself, “Well, look ... I don’t want to offend the king. It might be a bad witness. I could look obnoxious, so I’m just going to shut my window.” It would have been easy for him to argue within himself, “I’m going to kneel and pray quietly, but I’ll face the royal palace so people don’t know that I’m really praying to Jehovah.” He had so many rationalizations at his fingertips, but he refused to grasp on to them for selfish reasons.

Did God honor Daniel because Daniel honored Him? Yes! The Lord delivered his faithful prophet and destroyed his enemies.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

Then, of course, you have the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel chapter 3. The three Jews faced another government law requiring false worship. The Bible records the decree as saying that if anyone failed to bow and pray to the golden image that the Babylonian king set up, they were going to die in the flaming furnace. The Jews could even see the colossal oven smoldering in the distance.

How easy it would have been for the three Hebrew slaves to say, “When the music plays and everyone else bows down to the idol, let’s all just stoop down to adjust our sandals. I’m not actually going to pray to the image, but, you know, we don’t want to be a spectacle and disrupt the king’s party.” They could have found any number of additional excuses to look innocent and not really worship the king. They’d totally pray to the Lord with all their hearts. After all, that’s what really matters—right? How many rationalizations they could

have found to just cut corners, but they said, “No! We will not even appear like we’re compromising our worship of God.” They stood up for God, and God stood up for them!

I can guarantee you—in the same way the three young Hebrew men probably had some friends tugging on their trousers to bow down when the music played, you will be challenged and tested when you determine to keep God’s Sabbath. As everyone else bowed to the image in Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego probably heard, “Get down! Are you crazy? *Just this once*. Don’t be a fanatic!” Yes, the world, even some in the church, probably thought they were fanatics, but God honored them, because Jesus said, he that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.

Mordecai

In the book of Esther, we find a similar story regarding Haman the Aggagite, one of God’s enemies, who was descended from the Amalekites, the first nation to attack the children of Israel when they left Egypt.

A law was made by the king of Persia that said everybody was to bow down and worship Haman. Mordecai, a Jew living in Persia, said, “I can’t do that, even if it means that I lose my life.” He knew that his people would be targeted for his actions, but even though his devotion might lead to the suffering of others, he said, “I’m not going to compromise.” And indeed, a law was made to exterminate all of God’s people. Did God intervene to deliver His people despite the threats? He most certainly did. I encourage you to read the story for yourself and marvel at how God will bless you if you choose to make His worship supreme.

Desmond Doss

I had the privilege of becoming friends with a man who received the Congressional Medal of Honor. It’s the highest award that can be given in the United States. It was awarded to only one non-combatant in history—a Seventh-day Adventist Christian named Desmond T. Doss.

When called to serve during World War II, he said, “I will serve. I will try to save lives, but I refuse to pick up a weapon or take lives.” He also told them right from the beginning that he wouldn’t work on the Sabbath unless it was a medical emergency. Actually, he didn’t say, “I won’t do it.” He said, “I *can’t* do it, because as much as I respect my officers and superiors, God comes first.”

The army would try to put a rifle in his hands, and he wouldn’t hold it. They would try to make him work, and he would say, “On the Sabbath, I can’t. I’ll work six days a week, 24-hours-a-day, but from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, I can’t work.” If a life was in danger, he would gladly assist—but when it came to chores like sweeping the barracks or shoveling dirt, he flatly refused.

And for this commitment, he was jeered, tormented, ridiculed, and given the most unpleasant assignments all through his military experience ... that is, until they got to the front lines in the Pacific theater. His unit participated in some of the worst fighting in Okinawa during World War II. They were once called to storm a Japanese-held escarpment, and a hail of fire was coming down on them. Many marines and soldiers were killed, and scores of wounded lay on top of the bluff.

Doss heard their pleas for help and went up the cliff time after time to tend to them, and then lower them back down to safety, all while under a constant blizzard of enemy bullets. Every time he got back, the other soldiers would say, “You better stop. Don’t push your luck.” But when he heard another person calling out, he went back. No one else went. In the end, Doss singlehandedly brought back 70 wounded men! He was fearless, saying, “I’d rather die than disobey God’s Sabbath.” Remember, the Bible says, “Those who honor me, I will honor.”

The Attitude of Devotion

During World War II, many Jews in concentration camps were told they had to go dig up potatoes on Sabbath. The Nazis loved forcing people to compromise their beliefs. I have Jewish relatives who experienced this evil firsthand, and they were made to work on the Sabbath. Some of the victims were determined to be true, saying, “I

cannot do this. It's God's Sabbath." And they were either killed or tortured. Just like that. Others, of course, did compromise to save their lives, and I'm not here to judge them in that experience—it's nothing I've ever had to face in my life ... yet.

In the days of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, when they stood up, do you think they were the only Jews in the crowd that day? I'm sure there were some who bowed down. I'm afraid to say that there will be some Sabbathkeeping Christians who will go along with the world in the last days to save their lives. That's why this message is important. And if you don't know how to make a decision to honor the Sabbath when it is relatively easy, you need to ask the Lord for help now. Here's why ...

A Last-day Test

In these stories of Daniel, Mordecai, and the three Hebrew slaves, the issue was about whether to obey the commandments of God or men. (In fact, a dispute over true worship was also the issue involved when Cain killed Abel; see Genesis 4:2–15.) Could it also be that the last test before the end of time also revolves around the issue of proper worship?

Revelation 13:15 explains that in the future, a terrible law will be enacted by the beast power, who is “granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.” A law is going to be made regarding worship, that if you do not worship in the way the beast power dictates you should—at first you will not be able to buy or sell, then, ultimately, they will declare the death penalty.

In Revelation chapter 14, where we find the three angels' messages, an angel declares, “Worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (v. 7). That's a quote right out of the Sabbath commandment! “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea.” Then Revelation 14:12 says, speaking of the saved, “Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God.” It is contrasting those who keep the commandments of God with those who worship the beast—

“If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation” (v. 9).

The most fearsome curse in the Bible is found right here in Revelation 14, and it’s identifying those who worship the beast. Just a few verses later, on the other hand, it talks about those who keep the commandments of God. And it doesn’t mean *some* of the commandments, because everybody keeps some of them. It’s talking about a people who consistently keep *all* of the commandments.

And whether you know something is holy or not, it’s still holy. Yes, there are going to be many people in heaven who might have kept the wrong day as the Sabbath; they simply did not know the full truth, and the Lord will judge and bless them according to the light they had available. But they honored what they believed to be His commandments, just as Eric Liddell did.

So now that we have explored and understand the principles of why keeping the Sabbath holy should be our priority, what about some practical ways to ensure you’re keeping it the way God wants you to keep it? We’ll cover that in the next section ...

Part 2

A Cornell University study confirms the detrimental effects that work-related stress can have on families. Married couples with children and also 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. So many people are in desperate need of rest!

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, “You make them rest from their labor!” (Exodus 5:5). The angry king figured 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). But in an incredible way, God liberated His people from their bondage.

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 Promised Land. 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?

And again, before Christ comes, the Bible teaches that loyalty to God's Sabbath will be a dividing issue between God's people and the rest of the world. If someday keeping the Sabbath will potentially cost us our lives, should we take a soft approach to this sacred day right now?

It's like taking a pop quiz in school with questions that will appear on the final. We've been warned that these quizzes will happen, so we make choices to prepare ourselves for the final test by being ready for the pop quizzes. Passing a weekly quiz now helps us to be ready for the final test—and in the case of the Sabbath, that means determining our commitment to God.

Remember Reminder

The fourth commandment begins with the word "Remember." Why does God begin the Sabbath law with this word? Perhaps because the Lord knew how inclined we would be to forget! In fact, notice how within this one command you will find the *what*, the *where*, the *who*, the *how*, the *when*, and the *why* for keeping the Sabbath. God must have known we would have a lot of questions about the Sabbath, so this commandment has more specifics than any other. Let's look at the different parts:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy [*what*]. Six days you shall labor and do all your work [*how*], but the seventh day [*when*] is the Sabbath of the LORD your God [*who*]. In it you shall do no work [*how*]: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger [*who*] who is within your gates [*where*]. 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 [*why*]" (Exodus 20:8–11).

God covered a lot of ground in just this one commandment. Some

people think that this is the least of the Ten Commandments, one that we can modify on a whim or totally skip over. But Jesus said, “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19).

Is the Sabbath a “little” commandment? If you were to pick one commandment to break, perhaps you might think the Sabbath is not as important as not committing adultery, stealing, or worshiping idols. Yet, in the Old Testament, the penalty for Sabbath breaking was death. There was retribution for stealing, but the Sabbath law had a severe penalty.

Perhaps you’ve read about this incident of Sabbath breaking in the Old Testament: “Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day” (Numbers 15:32). Here was someone who was clearly violating God’s holy commandment and went against the express will of the Lord. This purposeful sin was met with the penalty of death (vv. 35, 36). I am certainly not recommending anyone be executed for breaking the Sabbath, but obviously this commandment is very important to God.

A message from the Lord through Ezekiel also brings out how seriously the Lord takes the significance of the Sabbath:

“Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them in the wilderness, to consume them” (Ezekiel 20:12, 13).

Not only is the Sabbath a sign of our saving relationship with the Lord, breaking the Sabbath is not an issue God takes lightly. Verses 20 to 24 also bring out how earnestly the Lord feels about profaning the Sabbath day. If we let our consciences be our guide and let our feelings determine how to keep the Sabbath, we will ignore the specific instructions given in the Bible for keeping God’s day in a way that honors Him.

Avoiding Both 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 sinned or did anything that violated the Sabbath commandment as outlined in Scripture. Jesus said, “I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10).

Christ did violate 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). Just before this, Jesus explained, “In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (v. 7). Worship and the Sabbath are intimately connected. Mankind’s traditions should never set aside or eclipse God’s requirements.

Neither Jesus nor His disciples ever broke the Sabbath or taught others to turn away from observing God’s holy day. In fact, the New Testament gives us plenty of examples of Christ and the apostles worshiping on the Sabbath. Luke writes how Jesus “went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). Christ not only worshiped on Sabbath, He also participated in the service. It was His custom. Most of the conflict over the Sabbath in the Gospels was Jesus working to clear up the Sabbath from manmade restrictions.

Another example of distorting the Sabbath is found in how we might interpret the word “pleasure,” found in this Old Testament passage that speaks about how to keep the Sabbath.

“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD” (Isaiah 58:13, 14).

The word “pleasure” in this passage doesn’t mean anything that you

enjoy doing is automatically wrong on the Sabbath. In fact, this passage calls Sabbathkeeping “a delight.” It is actually speaking of following your own personal pursuits, your own business plans, and your own selfish ways.

If we understood this passage to be a restriction on anything in which we might find enjoyment, then we probably wouldn’t even sit down to a delicious Sabbath meal. Obviously, that’s not what the verse teaches. It means to set aside pleasures that are self-focused and not God-focused. Walking through the beauty of nature is pleasurable, but going water skiing or snow skiing for the adrenaline rush would likely cause us to focus more on our own selves and not on the Lord or His glorious creation.

So we need to avoid extremes in how we keep the Sabbath holy. We should not become so legalistic with manmade rules that we find the Sabbath a burden, but neither should we focus so much on our own pleasures that we lose sight of our Lord who gave us this day.

Let’s now consider some guidelines and activities, based on the Bible, for leading us to truly keep the Sabbath day holy, as God asks us to do in the Ten Commandments.

A Time for Corporate Worship

The Sabbath is a day for us to come together in community worship. Notice how the Bible speaks about coming together for worship on Sabbath: “ ‘And it shall come to pass that ... from one Sabbath to another, all flesh shall come to worship before Me,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 66:23). In another place it says, “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation” (Leviticus 23:3).

A convocation is an assembly or gathering of people. In Leviticus, it refers to a coming together of God’s people to worship the Lord. The last book of the Bible tells us how important it is to worship. The first angel’s message states, “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and *worship* Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Revelation 14:7, my emphasis). Worship focuses on the Lord as our Creator.

I once read an article in a Christian magazine that suggested staying

home and worshiping God is just as appropriate as going to church. To make its claim, the writer quoted Exodus, where Moses told the people there would be no manna on the seventh day; God says, “Let every man remain in his place” (Exodus 16:29). According to the article, they were to keep the Sabbath by staying at home. But that’s not what it means. Moses was telling them not to go out of the camp to look for manna (or firewood). The sanctuary, where they would gather together and worship the Lord, was in the camp. The Sabbath is not a day to stay at home.

Now, I realize that some people, because of illness or injury, are homebound and cannot get out. This isn’t about their situation, and God is understanding and merciful. But the Bible doesn’t support the idea that you can be blessed just as much by staying at home on Sabbath as you can be in coming together with God’s people. It’s not a time to just hang out in your “tent” at home; it’s an opportunity to corporately praise and worship the Lord as a church family.

I once stumbled across this point while reading the story of the Shunammite woman’s son who died. When she told her husband she was going to see the prophet Elisha, he answered, “Why are you going to him today? It is neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath” (2 Kings 4:23). Did you catch the point? In other words, Sabbath was a day to come together with others, not sit at home alone.

There are lots of examples in the Bible that show Sabbath is a day for corporate worship. One of my favorites is, “And 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). Not only do we come together to worship the Lord, but also to encourage one another. That’s difficult to do when you are cooped up by yourself. And note, “*so much the more* as you see the Day approaching.” If there was ever a time we need to gather for worship, it is now!

A Time for Studying the Word

The Bible also teaches that the Sabbath is an ideal time for the study of the Scriptures. We’ve already noted Jesus’ example of going

to the synagogue “as His custom was” (Luke 4:16). But it also adds, “And 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). Jesus read from the Bible, the Old Testament book of Isaiah, when He announced His ministry on the Sabbath. The Scriptures were an important part of worship. This can also be seen in the early church. “On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God” (Acts 13:44).

Should we worship God every day? Of course. This is not an argument against the Sabbath, as some like to use it. Instead, God reserved a day for coming together for corporate worship. It is time set apart by God Himself—a unique slice of our week spoken for, a special singular engagement with the Lord.

Likewise, should we study the Bible every day? Yes! But most people cannot dedicate all seven days in the week to worship and Bible study. The Sabbath day is a distinct time to learn about God in a more focused way, a special time to study the Word and hear it proclaimed. When the Israelites gathered extra manna on Friday, it provided more time to study the Word together on Sabbath.

And that reminds me—if you own a Bible, and you should, please bring it to church with you. How do you know the pastor or Sabbath School teacher isn’t misquoting? If you don’t want to carry a full-sized Bible with you, they now have the Scriptures on smartphones and other electronic devices. Of course, don’t let your fancy technology distract you either. No computer games in church, please—remember, it’s a time for studying the Word!

A Time for Prayer

It is good for us to pray every day. But, once more, the Sabbath provides us a time to engage in focused worship, Bible 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 the Lord. 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: “And 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). Since the Sabbath is a memorial of creation, what a blessing it can be to find a place in nature to worship with family and friends and to pray together. That can make Sabbath even more remarkable!

Since prayer is like talking with God as you would converse with a friend, we can think of our prayer time on Sabbath as deepening our relationship with our best friend, Jesus. We know we cannot be saved unless we love the Lord. But how can you love somebody if you do not spend distinctive time with them?

A Time for Relationship

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

Those who have children understand that even though life gets busy, and there are times we give quick “hellos” and “goodbyes” on our way to work and school, there must be time to stop and consider our relationships. We need quality time with our children, to connect with them by wrapping our arms around them and talking to them individually. If you want to cultivate your marriage, you need more than an “I do” at the beginning. You need quality time to grow together.

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 the Lord and not be burdened by the cares of life. 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 aside.

A Time for Rest

As we discussed already, when Moses came to liberate the children of Israel from Egypt at God's command, he first met with the leaders of Israel. Even before speaking to Pharaoh, Moses talked with God's people about their great deliverance. After he explained what the God of their fathers would do, "they bowed their heads and worshiped" (Exodus 4:31). He also certainly spoke to them about their compromising with the Egyptians. They were working for Pharaoh seven days a week. But things began to change.

When Moses and Aaron approached the king of Egypt, they asked that God's people be released for a time that they might worship the Lord. Pharaoh balked and said, "Look, the people of the land are many now, and you make them rest from their labor!" (Exodus 5:5). Quite literally, he was saying, "You want to make them *sabbath* (the Hebrew word for "rest")? Forget it!" Then he increased their workload. The Pharaoh did not want the Israelites to keep the Sabbath and to remember their God.

The Exodus from slavery and entrance into the Promised Land revolved around holy resting. The devil still does not want God's people to rest. Just as the Israelites needed God's rest, so we also need to rest in God's deliverance. Before we reach the heavenly Promised Land, Satan will once more use the powers of this earth to try to stop God's people from worshiping on Sabbath and resting in the Lord. Such rest can be physical, mental, and emotional—but we cannot forget that it is spiritual rest as well.

It always strikes me as ironic that whenever I talk about keeping the Sabbath, somebody will invariably say that I'm works oriented. Actually, Sabbathkeepers are "rest" oriented. Those who do not want to keep the Sabbath are works oriented because Sabbath not only means "rest," it also represents God's work to save us, not our own works.

The Banana Plantation

"Thus says the LORD: 'Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I

commanded your fathers' ” (Jeremiah 17:21, 22).

A number of years ago, I heard about a Sabbathkeeper who operated a banana plantation in Central America. Evidently, because of an approaching storm, a fleet of banana boats arrived in a nearby port city to pick up cargos of bananas on Friday afternoon. It was unexpected, and they said, “We are leaving Saturday night because a storm is approaching. We cannot risk getting caught by the storm surge in port.”

Not wanting to risk their crops, most of the area farmers scrambled on Friday and Saturday to harvest their bananas to ensure they could get paid. But one Christian plantation owner quickly realized he would not be able to do that and keep the Sabbath. When some of his neighbors noticed that he did not have his workers out in the field to harvest, they said, “All the ships are leaving! It'll be the last set of ships for the season. You're going to lose your whole crop!”

He answered, “I can't do it without breaking the Sabbath, and so I figure this is God's problem. I'm not going to do it.” Instead, he chose to rest when God said to rest.

As people are wont to do, they tried to reason with him. They said, “What about your family? God understands. You'll waste everything! You can give some of your profit to the church.”

But the man answered with the Bible, “ ‘Has God as great a delight in sacrifices and offerings as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice.’ So what if I give an offering to the church? God would rather have me obey!” They concluded he was insane.

And so they all went back to work and harvested their bananas, bringing them down to the ships and collecting their money. But as the ships disappeared on the horizon, the man in church was with his family, resting, and his bananas were still in the field.

The next week, following the tropical storm, a straggler banana boat drifted into harbor. It had stalled in the sea with engine trouble as the other ships had come in and left. They still needed to buy bananas. Of course, all the other bananas were sold because the farmers thought that all the ships had left, so the captain of the delayed boat was now willing to pay nearly twice as much for anyone who had bananas! God honors those who honor Him in His rest. And all of his friends watched in amazement as he then went down to the

port and sold his bananas for nearly twice what he would have received if he had panicked and failed the test.

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 day. 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). In fact, the children of Israel were instructed to bring an offering before the Lord every Sabbath: "This is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering with its drink offering" (Numbers 28:10).

When you come before a king, it is customary to bring a gift. You should not approach a king empty handed; it is considered impolite. The very audience of a king is a privilege and a great honor. When the wise men came looking for Jesus, the newborn King, they brought gifts. Sabbath is a day we come before the King of the universe, and it is good to bring an offering. Even if you have nothing to bring, you can bring yourself. Remember, the widow who gave two pennies was praised by Jesus for bringing something.

A Time for Restoration

Sabbath is also a day to bring restoration. As we go out in God's creation, we experience recreation—or "re-creation." Our bodies are restored by rest.

Likewise, as we visit the sick on the Sabbath, it restores their spirits. But the Sabbath is not only a day to relieve unnecessary suffering in the lives of others; the Sabbath itself needs to be restored because it has been trampled upon so long by God's people. Isaiah chapter 58 is filled with guidance on living for God and serving others, and it ends with an emphasis on the Sabbath. I think there's a powerful connection between how we live and God's rest day!

Let me touch on just a few points from this passage. It begins with people complaining that God doesn't notice their religious activities. The reason is that everything they do focuses on self. For instance, the fasting God desires is to "loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke" (Isaiah 58:6). Some of the heaviest burdens carried by people in the time of Jesus were manmade regulations for keeping the Sabbath. These rules didn't help one think of God or others; they were self-righteous works that required so much of their own attention they left little room for God in the heart.

God promises that when people turn toward others to "share your bread with the hungry" and "see the naked and cover him" that "your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you" (v. 8). "The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail" (v. 11). This reminds me of what Jesus said to the woman at the well.

Now notice something else God's people will do ...

"Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, The Restorer of Streets to Dwell In" (v. 12).

When Jerusalem was broken down by the Babylonians, the people had to rebuild the walls. They started with the old foundations and built new walls. They didn't move the foundation, but raised it up. One of the "repairs" accomplished by Nehemiah in the restoration of Jerusalem was teaching the people to keep the Sabbath. God's people became lax and forgot about God's holy day. They needed to *remember*, just as the Sabbath commandment begins. There was a breach—an infraction of God's law.

The devil hates the Sabbath because it is a sign of a faithful relationship with God. And through the centuries, Satan has attempted to break people away from the fourth commandment. He's done everything he can to obscure and misrepresent the Sabbath truth. Even today you can go to most churches and preach about nine of the commandments and receive a hearty "amen"; but if you talk about the fourth commandment, you'll often be met with scorn.

God said that in the last days, He would raise up a people who would restore the ancient paths, the foundations laid at the beginning of our world. The Sabbath was not an afterthought. It wasn't a Jewish footnote to the Ten Commandments. It is placed in the heart of the Decalogue because, I believe, it is close to God's heart. And remember, it didn't show up at Sinai; it was established at Creation (see Genesis 2:1–3).

The next verse in Isaiah spells out exactly what law was broken and needed repairing. "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him" (Isaiah 58:13). Why would God ask them to turn away their foot from the Sabbath? Shouldn't we "walk" in the ways of Sabbath? Of course! But that's not what this verse is saying.

Have you ever visited an Eastern culture and entered a church or even a home and noticed how people remove their shoes? It is a sign of respect. God said to Moses, "Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). The Sabbath is holy time, and we should walk sacredly through the day with God. Verse 13 suggests that people were trampling on the fourth commandment with abandon. But as the verse also says, it is a day to honor God. We should restore the Sabbath that so many have trampled on.

Sabbath Conversation

The Lord then explained how to respect the Sabbath in the rest of this verse. "Not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words" (v. 13). We've already discussed the issue of what this means (and doesn't mean). But let me reiterate that the Sabbath is not *your* day to do *your* thing. It's God's day, a time we are to delight in our relationship with the Lord. The verse adds, "nor speaking your own words." Jesus said it is "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). So when we focus on our own words, we show that we are not focused on the Lord. True Sabbathkeeping begins in the heart.

I think we should discipline our minds more on this point. It's not

legalistic to learn to educate yourself to honor God in your speech on the Sabbath day. Like Enoch, who walked with God, we should practice walking with our Lord every Sabbath and train our minds to dwell on sacred themes.

We transgress God's law when we converse about worldly things or engage in trifling conversation on the Sabbath. Some people talk about anything that comes into their minds, but not everything is worthy of expression on the Sabbath. Every word that turns us from God can lead us into bondage. We should pray like David, "Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3).

Sometimes on Sabbath you might be talking with someone who doesn't share your beliefs. It's very easy to begin discussing the economy or the new addition to your house or the best place to purchase groceries. How often do we join right in without stopping to think, "Does this honor the Lord?" I think, more often than not, we have the power to guide the conversation in a different direction. This is why God chose us—to represent Him in a lost world.

This can happen in the church as well, and even in our own homes. Children's minds are so active, and they can jump all over the place in what they talk about. Very quietly, and with loving firmness, parents can say, "Let's talk about something else. Let's remember God's Sabbath." Then make a suggestion for a different topic or activity.

When we seek to honor the Lord on the Sabbath, He promises, "Then you shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isaiah 58:14). True Sabbathkeepers have a deep satisfaction in their hearts. To "ride on the high hills of the earth" simply means to be raised up and honored by God. When we honor the Sabbath, the Lord will honor us. Restoring the Sabbath to its rightful place restores the person who seeks to make it a priority every seventh day.

Practical Tips for Preparing for the Sabbath

As I've mentioned, one of the most important parts of the Sabbath commandment is summed up in the word "remember." This does not

mean you wait until the sun is cresting the horizon Friday afternoon to say, “Well, it’s almost Sabbath. I guess I need to get prepared.” How would most wives feel if on their anniversary, their husbands woke up, glanced at a calendar, and said, “Oh, look at that. It’s our anniversary! I almost forgot. Good thing I remembered. I better grab a card on my way home from work.” That wouldn’t be very meaningful, would it?

Sabbath is extraordinary time to honor God. The Sabbath is special. The Lord promises to meet us in a more significant way and to bless us on this day He has blessed. If we live to worship and glorify the Lord, surely it is worth investing some time to prepare for this holy meeting. It shouldn’t be an afterthought late Friday afternoon. It would even be good to start thinking about the upcoming Sabbath on Saturday evening when the sun goes down. We should plan our week with the next Sabbath already in mind.

The Sabbath is like a calibration tool. To calibrate means to make precise adjustments for a particular function. When God is the center of our lives and we seek to glorify Him, the Sabbath keeps life in perspective. It is time that helps us fight against becoming preoccupied with the cares of this world. Our week will revolve not around our own agendas, but around the Sabbath, the highlight of the week. It’s a day to measure ourselves against God’s standard so that we are not overtaken “as a thief” (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

Let’s now look at some practical 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 work week—bills, projects, official papers, etc. When Friday comes, I stack them up and put them away. You know what happens when you see these projects? You start thinking about them. They are less of a distraction if they are covered or put away.

What about cooking on the Sabbath? Exodus 16:23–26 speaks about not baking or boiling on Sabbath. How do we understand this text in our day? 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 in advance, do it in advance. I don't believe the Sabbath should be dedicated to elaborate cooking and heavy food preparation. Why be like Martha when you can be at the feet of Jesus?

So practically speaking, prepare your main meal items on Friday. Some things don't sit well overnight and are not time consuming to make, like a salad. It's not very pleasant to eat some foods that sit and turn soggy. The basic principle is to get as much done on Friday so that you can more easily heat up and put out appetizing food for Sabbath. We want to preserve quality time for fellowship, worship, and connection with God. Something my wife uses in our home is the "time bake" feature on our oven. She prepares dishes on Friday, puts them in the oven on Sabbath morning, and when we get home from church, "ding!"—our food is ready. And, of course, microwaves are great tools in the same way.

Even those who work on Sabbath in church institutions where there is a cafeteria, such as in a hospital or boarding school, can simplify preparations for Sabbath. Workers should take turns so that everyone has a chance to worship with others in the church. We all need time to sit at Jesus' feet!

Conducting Business on Sabbath

Some people ask, "What's wrong with making purchases on Sabbath? Besides, we handle money on Sabbath when we give our offerings. What's the difference in handing money to a waitress at a restaurant?" The Bible directly addresses buying and selling on the Sabbath in the book of Nehemiah. Here we find a prophet guiding God's people into proper Sabbathkeeping. In making a covenant with the Lord, the people promised, "If the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath" (Nehemiah 10:31).

I believe giving an offering to God is different from buying something, engaging people in trade, or hiring somebody to do work for you. The Bible tells us Sabbath is not only a day for us to rest from our labors, but it's also to provide that rest for those who work for us. When we pay someone to cook our food and clean up after us, it falls

into the category of buying and selling. We should prepare in advance for Sabbath. Also, the environment in most public eating places is often filled with worldly music and conversation that pulls our minds away from God.

Nehemiah had to confront the Jewish leaders and take further action to deal with Sabbath breaking. This isn't the first generation to wrestle with these types of issues.

“In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, ‘What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.’ So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath” (Nehemiah 13:15–19).

There are a couple of points in this story that guide us in proper Sabbathkeeping. Nehemiah was clearly against the idea of unbelievers selling to the children of Israel on Sabbath. He explained that such conduct profanes the Sabbath. To “profane” means to defile or treat something sacred with abuse. It shows a lack of reverence. God’s Word says when we engage in this type of buying and selling, we are actually desecrating the Sabbath day. I think God still cares to this day how we treat this sacred day, because God does not change.

A Day for Doing Good

Of course, 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 in a synagogue who asked Him if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. He answered them, “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).

Sheep still fall into pits today. In other words, there are unforeseen emergencies that arise on the Sabbath that call for our practical attention. If a woman goes into labor on the Sabbath, should we tell her not to “labor” on a rest day and to wait to have her baby another day? When people suffer on the Sabbath and it is within our abilities to help them, shouldn’t we have a heart for them, even more than for suffering animals stuck in a ditch?

Jesus once spoke to a group of stubborn Jews who were angry that He healed a crippled man lying near the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. Jesus basically told them, “You circumcise baby boys on the eighth day according to the law—even if it falls on the Sabbath day—yet you are upset that I made a man completely better?” (see John 7:22, 23). Another time Jesus said, “Have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?” (Matthew 12:5).

Sometimes there is work on Sabbath—just ask most pastors—that is good and necessary. Priests in the Old Testament did certain jobs associated with the temple services, yet they were not condemned. They hauled wood and water for the sacrifices and the washing, all for the service of God. It is important to keep in mind the context of these situations. They did not focus on self-pleasing; these were done in service to God.

There are some jobs that we do on Sabbath as part of the service of the church that are necessary and important for worship—opening the building, possibly heating up the sanctuary, turning on lights, providing water for foot washing, greeting people, handing out bulletins, or setting out food for a fellowship meal. Even these good things should be done with balance. Volunteers should rotate so that the same members do not miss out sitting at the feet of Jesus, like Martha needed to do. Some members love to help with potlucks each week and miss hearing a sermon for months at a time. We should avoid this and rotate Sabbath responsibilities.

The Ox in the Ditch

Sometimes, in an effort to explain away our actions on the Sabbath, we joke about our deed as being “an ox in the ditch,” based on Jesus’ reference in Luke 14:5. There are other references in the Bible to donkeys and sheep falling into pits as well. What does this mean? I think when an urgent need comes to our attention on Sabbath, we should pitch in and help someone out of a difficulty.

I’ve stopped on Sabbath to help people stranded beside the road with a dead car battery. In one case, after briefly looking under the hood, I reconnected a tube on a carburetor and had them on their way in no time. Another time my son Stephen and I were driving home from church when we came on a scene where someone’s car had stalled in the middle of an intersection. Everyone else driving by was honking at them. We looked at each other, pulled over, jumped out, and helped push the car off to the side of the road.

On the other hand, we can go too far in identifying donkeys in ditches on Sabbath until we are spending all of our time—as some youth ministries suggest—cleaning people’s yards, painting houses, and mowing lawns. I believe this can take young people away from worship and lead them to believe it is okay to work on Sabbath. I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind.

There might even be “good” things that we set aside on Sabbath. When Christ died, certain women came to assist with His burial. Late on Friday, as the sun was going down, these women, who loved Jesus, brought spices to honor Christ’s body and prepare it for burial. But notice what the Bible says as the Sabbath drew near: “And they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment” (Luke 23:56). They did not complete the job they came to do. You would think, under these circumstances, that it would be appropriate to care for Christ’s body. After all, this was Jesus! But they set this work aside.

“Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared” (Luke 24:1). It is interesting that these women, who followed Jesus for three years, did not complete the work of embalming Christ’s body; instead, they chose to observe the Sabbath. Most people would say, “Well, we realize the sun is going down, but we’re not quite done caring for Jesus’ body, so let’s

keep working.” I think this passage teaches us that some things can wait. Let’s not be too quick to call something an “ox in a ditch” if it can wait until the Sabbath is over.

We can also too easily classify what we think is “necessary” work on Sabbath but that actually profanes God’s holy day. Sometimes schools schedule exams on Sabbath. Wouldn’t it be a necessary job to take that exam so that we can complete our education? Fortunately, in the United States, we have laws that protect students who have religious convictions about their day of rest. But if we didn’t, to what length would we go to try to work around that difficulty? I think what often happens is that we begin to make little compromises. Over a period of time, these small concessions start to change our convictions until we excuse many more things. There are times we need to take a stand for God.

Within Your Gates

Each of us has a circle of influence. God points this out in the Sabbath commandment when He says, “In it you shall do not 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*” (Exodus 20:10, my emphasis). God has given each of us areas of responsibility. That which is “within your gates” speaks of your own household.

In Bible times, most people had property. Today we might think of people having farms and ranches. God basically said, “You are responsible for Sabbathkeeping within your household, your property, and your fence line.” The circle went beyond one’s children and extended to not only servants who worked on the farm, but even to strangers visiting. If your aunt came to visit and started weeding your garden on Sabbath, you would kindly inform her, “Thank you so much for being helpful, but can we please reschedule this for another day? In our home we honor the Sabbath day by resting from work.”

Some people have a difficult time keeping Sabbath when visiting unbelieving relatives who might want to sit down to watch football and drink beer on Sabbath afternoon. You might find it less stressful to stay in a hotel on Sabbath or gracefully arrange to be elsewhere

during those hours if it puts your family into awkward and challenging circumstances. Of course, we should honor and respect other people, but we should teach our children to first honor the Lord.

There are lots of questions we could try to tackle about where your “gate” of responsibility ends. For instance, when you pick up your phone and make a call on Sabbath, there are people somewhere out there who work at the phone company that help keep everything operating. There is money that you’ve invested at the bank and people who continue to manage that money on Saturdays. Are these people within “your gate”?

I follow this guideline based on the statement in the fourth commandment. I define what is within “my gate” as *what is under my authority*. There are things in our world that are not under my authority. When I turn on a light switch, it is not within my authority to determine what happens with the electric company.

A Day to Not Waste

Some people waste the precious hours of Sabbath sleeping away time that could be put to better use. It’s one thing to enjoy some physical rest on Sabbath, especially for those who are involved in heavy manual labor all week. But missing Sabbath worship because we are too tired to go to church can become habit-forming.

Another way we can waste our energies on Sabbath is by gorging ourselves with copious portions of food. Too much of even good, healthy food can actually dull our minds. Sabbath meals should be made memorable, appetizing, and even include a simple treat, but that doesn’t mean we need nine different delicacies to choose from. Often, we eat too much on Sabbath, especially at potlucks, and then want to find the nearest hammock and snore away the remainder of these sacred hours.

Sleeping in on Sabbath morning can also create a rushed atmosphere to prepare and get to church on time. How much better to get up a little earlier and enjoy a peaceful time preparing for worship. The bustle and confusion of trying to gulp down our breakfast, get dressed, make sure we have what we need for church—it can create tension and tempt us to be impatient with each other. The day that is

meant to be a restful delight becomes a day of stress. We stop looking forward to Sabbath and start wishing it were over. How sad!

Enjoyable Sabbaths take planning and forethought. But isn't God worth it? Isn't the Lord worth giving your time to because you love Him? When a married couple cares for their marriage, even if they do not have lots of money, they will take time to plan for quiet moments together, memorable dates where they can connect. Isn't it true that when husbands and wives plan for those times, it makes their spouses feel cherished?

When I travel, Karen often writes a card or two in advance and places them in my luggage. She always tries to hide them where she figures I'll find them because it's no fun when I get home and she asks, "Did you read my card?" and I say, "What card?" It's always pleasant, when I'm digging through belongings on a trip, to pull out a card with a little note or kiss or something on it. Her little love letters show me she was thinking about me. Should we do any less for the God who created us?

But even if your attitude or mood isn't always the best, it's worth keeping the Sabbath. Even if you don't always feel like you have the right spirit, honor the Sabbath because God commands you to keep the day holy. Do it to the best of your ability. Sometimes we do things we don't "feel" like doing only to discover that when we put one foot in front of the other, our feelings change. I have a friend who tells me that on the Sabbaths when it's a struggle to get to church, those are the days when he usually receives the biggest blessing at church.

Just because you might not *feel* like keeping the Sabbath doesn't mean you stop obeying. God is looking for people who will stand up for Him no matter what. And that means being faithful, even in that which is least. Don't be ashamed of saying to your friends, "I can't do that activity because it is God's Sabbath." God will honor you if you honor Him.

Seize the Sabbath Day!

Salvation is all about love. The great commandments are all about loving God and loving our neighbors. Every love relationship grows in the garden of quality time, and the Sabbath is all about special time

with God. The devil knows if he can choke out our sacred hours with Jesus, he can fill our minds with other things. Then our love might grow very cold.

Sabbath is holy time given to us by God so that we may stop 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 supporting others, especially those who are suffering. Sabbath is a day for visiting the sick and encouraging those in prison. It is a day to put away our own agendas and think about others.

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

Perhaps you have not spent much time thinking about how to practically keep God's Sabbath holy. I would encourage you to make a commitment right now. Say, "Lord, help me to honor You and 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.

Part 3

Children and the Sabbath

If you have children, the Sabbath can be uniquely challenging. What do you do with the kids? This is a subject that really needs attention because if you get it wrong, the Sabbath will either become a burden for your children or become a day that doesn't really mean anything at all. If you do it right, it will be a delight and a blessing to them!

So let's begin with first things first—"Fathers and mothers should make it a rule that their children attend public worship on the Sabbath and should enforce the rule by their own example" (Ellen White, *Child Guidance*, p. 531).

How many fathers send their children to church on Saturday or Sunday morning but stay home themselves so they can watch the news and read the sports section in peace? This is a horrible practice, dividing the family on a very important occasion and being a poor example in honoring the holiness of God. Your children are going to do what you do, so you ought to attend church by example.

Bundles of Energy

Let's face it though: Kids have more energy than a nuclear reactor.

They have, it seems like, unending energy, and when you put the seatbelt on in their pew Sabbath morning and they're sitting still the whole time—and then you take them home and say, "Now we get to sit for another six hours," ... well, it's no wonder that they watch the clock waiting for the Sabbath to finally end.

So it's important that you keep their active minds engaged and give them positive things to do. But I also want to suggest that there's a significant difference between the Sabbath being a delight ... and feeling guilty because you're not making the Sabbath a time of

entertainment. I don't know that there's a command anywhere that says we are to make every Sabbath day for our children like a trip to Disneyland. Remember, it's a holy day. That doesn't mean you can't enjoy yourself and your family. You might do something that happens to be fun. (I have fun preaching.) But the idea that we need to be entertained every moment is, I think, a plague on our newest generations. That's a corruption in our thinking.

I'm sad to say I've seen parents hand their kids a Gameboy or smartphone during church, and the kids are shooting asteroids—or whatever it is they're playing these days—because their parents are afraid that the kids might not have fun. It's understandable: The parents want the kids to enjoy church and to be manageable and quiet.

The problem is, well, they're not hearing the Word of God. And another problem is that we're setting them up for the future—are they going to want to sit in church, calmly listening to a sermon, when they're 45 years old, or are they going to want to distract themselves with the latest iPad game? At some point, we need to be teaching our children to be respectful and to sit and listen because we want them to transition from being children to being adults. While they might not understand much of what they're hearing, it's still an exercise that will help them later in life. Theoretically, as they get older, they'll understand more and more of the sermon and be able to apply it.

Be Engaging

But there are things we can do, not just in church but during the whole day, that can make Sabbath something really special.

One of my former churches has a great Sabbath School department that keeps the young people engaged in learning. They make it interesting and interactive, but they also realize that it takes a lot of effort. (Does doing anything with children ever not require lots of effort?) It often takes great labor during the week to help our children enjoy their Sabbath rest.

The options are seemingly unlimited, however—reading spiritual books, going on nature walks, or visiting shut-ins or nursing homes to bring joy to other people's lives.

My family enjoys going out in nature and exploring God's creation. Nature is a good thing, even though you can't do it all year long because of the weather. But this also provides some challenges—such as, what if you go to a river or a lake; can the kids go swimming? Should they only wade up to their ankles ... or knees, perhaps? I've heard all kinds of parents weigh in on this, and they can be passionate, and it's something my own family struggles to get right.

On one Sabbath, we went up to a creek near our cabin in the woods. Our kids wanted to know if they could get in the water. We said, "Well, you can take off your shoes." It is my belief that wading around, collecting rocks, and looking at crawdads are good ways to get out in God's creation, to feel it with your toes a little bit. But the next thing you know, one of our kids was completely "baptized." He didn't want to be—he got pushed in and pretty soon the focus was on them playing around. When it comes to these things, you just need to give them guidelines so that they can enjoy being out in nature but remembering that it is holy time. It's one thing when you're down at the river with the kids on Sabbath and they are cooling off their toes; it's something else if they're doing cannonballs off the diving board. They're really not thinking about God, are they?

It also might be okay to go for a Sabbath drive with the family, especially if the conversation is focused on God or you're listening to a sermon or a Christian CD for children, but you don't want to get involved in the Indy 500 while all that's going on. You could say, "Well, I'm just driving!" But there is a difference. So you need to use some intelligence about the purpose of your Sabbath outing. It's also great to have your kids involved in Pathfinders, Adventure Club, or similar groups. They might get out in nature more often and collect flowers, pine cones, and rocks.

If the weather is bad outside, have your child invite a friend home and draw pictures of nature. You can sing together. Do 20 questions on Bible characters. You can also visit shut-ins or call or write someone who needs encouragement. Have them write a letter to a Bible character. Again, it might take some energy, well spent energy, thinking about things that can be done to help your kids burn off some of their energy that they naturally have. If you honor God and stick close to His heart, your children will fall in love with the Sabbath and look forward to it.

After being born, baby dolphins actually have to learn how to swim. It doesn't take them very long, but you'll often see them swimming upside down. They're going down when they need to go up. They don't know how to breathe yet. They're not sure where the air is, and just like human babies, they've got to breathe shortly after they're born or they don't survive. The mother and father and other dolphins in the pod will get under the little one and push it up to the surface, where it will finally take a breath; they'll let the newborn swim around and they know instinctively when it's ready for another breath. On a regular basis, for the first hours or days of its life, they keep pushing the baby to the surface so it can breathe. Eventually, the baby dolphin gets the hint and can do these things on its own.

Well, our children need to be trained how to breathe holy air. Sometimes they might resist our efforts and refuse to breathe in the Sabbath rest—they might even go the wrong direction on purpose at times—but they just need that gentle guidance from you so they will find out where it is to be at rest in the Lord. And that is always worth your energy!