

Sabbathkeeping (Part 2)

Idolatry and Sabbath Breaking

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In the previous sermon regarding the Sabbath, I was attempting to put the Sabbath in its proper context for us by showing how important it is—from God's perspective—to the relationship that He has invited us into.

Sometimes I am appalled at how strong the inclination is in me to look at the things of God in the same way that the world does. And I feel that if I have this inclination, then it's very likely that you have similar inclinations within you as well. I'm doing what I am doing at the beginning of this sermon again because we have grown up in a Protestant/Catholic dominated culture. The beliefs and the attitudes, from that culture, are part of what we must overcome.

The Protestants as a whole dismiss the Sabbath as being merely ceremonial. The Catholic Church is a bit more honest, admitting that if one goes by the Bible only, the Sabbath is to be kept. But then they say that they have the authority to change things. And they've not only changed it; but they've also removed the second commandment from God's law, and replaced it by dividing the tenth commandment into two. So, therefore, they in effect dismiss it, despite the fact that it is a part *of the royal law* as James says. James also said that it is part of *the law of liberty*—one that sets free. Therefore, it is an act of immorality to break the Sabbath!

That is a major key to understanding its importance to God. Immorality is simply the failure to live up to, or to conform to, an accepted standard. The standard, brethren, is *God's Law*, which we agreed to keep when we made the covenant with Him. Remember this simple principle: Love binds. Immorality breaks, separates, splits, scatters, and divides.

Ezekiel 20 reveals the breaking of the Sabbath as one of the major causes of God sending Israel into captivity. One can easily see that adultery, lying, and stealing is immoral; but somehow Sabbath breaking never seems to be associated with immorality, because today in our age the emphasis is on sexual sin.

As far as the Bible is concerned, which day to keep is never an issue; rather, just as with any other of the commandments, the issue is always why and how to keep it.

In that first sermon, we were reminded that the Sabbath is the "*sign*" between God and His people for several reasons. It is to remind us who we are, and that our God is the Creator—because the Sabbath is a memorial to creation. It identifies. It distinguishes us from others. It separates us from others. And it can be more easily recognized by those outside of the fellowship. Keeping it, therefore, draws attention to us.

If it is kept properly, it gives evidence of the state of the relationship between us and God. A very important part! This is because the way the Sabbath is kept—if it is carefully kept, the way that God desires—compresses into a single concept: a recurring appointment with the Deity. Each and every Sabbath is an appointment with God. It covers the whole, unique

covenant relationship. No other religion, except Judaism, which also keeps the Sabbath to some degree, has anything quite like it.

Exodus 16:28 And the LORD said to Moses, How long refuse you to keep my commandments and my laws?

The subject of this chapter is the Sabbath. It's when God began the process of revealing to them which day was the Sabbath by bringing a double portion of manna on the day before, and then no manna at all. Of course, some of the people went out and tried to pick manna on the Sabbath day. That is why God responded, in verse 28, the way He did. "How long?" What He is saying, besides what is so obvious, is that the Sabbath already existed by this time. The Sabbath began at creation. Not Sinai—but at creation!

Israel, as a nation, began breaking the Sabbath right from the get-go. Even before they got to Sinai, they were already breaking the Sabbath. That's why God said many of the things that He did back there in the book of Ezekiel. I want you to see this scripture again, in Ezekiel 20.

Ezekiel 20:16 Because they despised my judgments, and walked not in my statutes, but polluted my Sabbaths [Why did they pollute His Sabbaths? This is what I want us to see.] for [Here was the cause.] their heart went after their idols.

"Their heart"—their innermost beings, their minds—"went after their idols." This is a very important principle to understand. I'm going to go back to I John 5:18.

I John 5:18-21 We know [The "we" being church members.] that whosoever is born of God sins not; but he that is begotten of God keeps [or, guards] himself and that wicked one touches him not. And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, [This is how the book ends.]keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

I'm going to read this to you from "The Living Bible." It's a little bit plainer in this paraphrase.

I John 5:18-21 [Living Bible] No one who has become a part of God's family makes a practice of sinning, for Christ, God's Son, holds him securely and the devil cannot get his hands on him. We know that we are the children of God and that all the rest of the world around us is under Satan's power and control. And we know that Christ, God's Son, has come to help us understand and to find the true God. And now we are in God because we are in Jesus Christ his Son, who is the only

true God; and he is eternal Life. Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.

"Keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts." That's what idolatry is! And it was idolatry that caused the people to break the Sabbath, when the children of Israel were in the wilderness; and that is the same thing that causes *us* to break the Sabbath today. Something comes between us and God.

If you look into a fairly detailed commentary regarding these verses, they will tell you that, within the framework of the whole book of I John, John closes this book with what is undoubtedly in their minds—a reflection of the Garden of Eden, where idolatry began. And idolatry, brethren, is where sin begins!

Now, where did that sin begin? What we are seeing here is the course of sin. Sin began with a wrong and illicit desire that was not controlled. Then, Satan became the idol, whenever they submitted to him, thus gaining control of mankind. An idol is anything that imposes its will upon a person: persuading, inducing, and forcing the person to submit to it rather than to God. And, brethren, the idol does not have to be alive. It can be an inanimate thing, because sin is *internally internally* generated. Do you know where Jesus said sin comes from? "Out of the heart..."

Matthew 15:19 For out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts.

Do you see where I'm headed? Sabbath breaking begins in the heart: following after an idol—something that comes between us and God. In the Old Testament, God uses a leering statute of Baal, Dagon, and Molech and a host of others to illustrate His point. But Paul picked up on that, and something that Jesus said, and he says:

Colossians 3:5 Mortify [put to death] therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Covetousness is internally generated. Covetousness is the following of a wrong desire. All that Paul did was to magnify the Law—the tenth commandment—in the same way that Jesus magnified those same laws in Matthew 5. And He extended it to the tenth chapter, even as Jesus covered murder and adultery in Matthew 5. Now go with me to I Peter 4: 3, just to show you that Paul was not the only one who thought in this line.

I Peter 4:1, 3 For as much then as Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind... For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought [worked] the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries.

"Walking" indicates movement. He's talking about moving through life, driven by wrong desires.

"Idolatry" is another one of those biblical code words for anything that can injure, profane, defile, come between, or sully our relationship with God; and, therefore, His purpose for us. Unlawful desire—idolatry—lies at the base of sin.

Now you might recall the simple illustration that Genesis 3 provides us of Adam and Eve in the Garden, the beautiful environment that God provided for them. From everything that we are able to see, there was a good relationship between them and God. But it was the desire for the forbidden fruit that began the chain of events that destroyed the relationship, got them kicked out of the garden, and separated them from God.

It's so simple to understand the process that is involved here. God gave them a simple command. What is so hard to understand about the fourth commandment? God gave them a simple command: *"Don't eat the fruit of that one tree."* But their desire set them up for Satan's persuasion. And then he, the ultimate demon, became the god that they submitted to—or, rather, worshipped—rather than God. Idolatry was born through an evil, unlawful desire.

About a year ago, Richard found a quote and gave to me. I have been saving it until this time wondering where I could use it in a sermon. The quote was from Ralph Waldo Emerson. I just thought of it this morning and maybe it belongs right here. I don't have the quote with me, but I am sure that I have it right. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, *"It is essential that we be careful what we worship, because what we worship we are becoming."* Do you understand the positive side of what he said? IF we truly worship God, we will become God! And that's where God is leading us.

This is why He so hates idolatry. Why He so hates evil desire, because evil desire is idolatry. It places something between us and Him; and we worship the desire, rather than what He said.

This is one of the reasons why Paul shows, in I Corinthians 10, that there is a demon lurking behind the idol. That is why God said the reason Israel broke the Sabbath was because like Adam and Eve "their hearts went after their idols."

James 1:13-16 Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it brings forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, brings forth death. Do nor err, my beloved brethren.

Again, I'm going to read this from "The Living Bible."

James 1:13-16 [The Living Bible] And remember, when someone wants to do wrong it is never God who is tempting him, for God never wants to do wrong and never tempts anyone else to do it. Temptation is the pull of man's own evil thoughts and wishes. These evil thoughts lead to evil actions and afterwards to the death penalty from God. So don't be misled, dear brothers

Desire arises to use the Sabbath in a way that is somewhere beyond the simple directives of God. The temptation arises, perhaps in part motivated by a demon; and our heart follows after it, rather than God's simple directive. Just like Adam and Eve. It is not complicated.

I Corinthians 10:6-10, 13-14 Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be you idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur you, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer... There has not temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer [allow] you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, flee from idolatry.

I Corinthians 10:20-21 But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils [demons], and not to God: and I would not that you should have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons: you cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of demons.

If you understand the context that we have there, idolatry is linked to every one of these sins—lust, false religion, fornication, tempting Christ, and griping. I think that It is entirely possible that we don't often think of idolatry's direct link to Sabbath breaking.

Now we are going to go back to the book of Ezekiel and look at a few verses there.

Ezekiel 2:3, 6 And he said unto me, Son of man, I send you to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day... And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns be with you, and you do dwell among scorpions: be not afraid of their looks, though they be a rebellious house.

Ezekiel 3:1, 7 Moreover, he said unto me, Son of man, eat that you find; eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel... But the house of Israel will not hearken [listen] to you; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted.

I think that most of us are familiar with some of the background of Ezekiel, but I want to review briefly. The book of Ezekiel is addressed to the house of Israel. That's mainly why I read those

scriptures right there. It's plainly addressed to the house of Israel. Now Judah is included within the greater Israel. But the context of the book, as a whole, is primarily addressed to Israel—already in captivity. Israel and Judah went into captivity at separate times. Judah went into captivity one hundred and twenty years after Israel did. But the message in Ezekiel was written while what caused the captivity was still going on. We saw in Ezekiel 20 what caused them to go into captivity. It was idolatry and Sabbath breaking. So what caused Israel and Judah to go into captivity at separate times was still going on!

Since Judah went into captivity a hundred and twenty years after Israel, and Ezekiel was a Jew in captivity, with the Jews, Ezekiel's message never got to the house of Israel! Therefore, what we are looking at in the book of Ezekiel is a recording by God, through Ezekiel, on three levels: (1) Past history, even in Ezekiel's time; (2) What was happening, even as Ezekiel wrote; and (3) What is prophesied to happen, even as I speak to you at this very moment.

I want to pursue the idolatry angle a bit more, through Ezekiel, because that's what caused them to go into captivity. It is what was happening at the time Ezekiel was writing. And that is what was prophesied to occur in our day. So I want to pursue the idolatry angle, because I want us to see how much a part idolatry played in what God said to Israel in the chapters leading up to Ezekiel 20 which have to do, of course, with the Sabbath.

If you look in "Strong's Concordance," you will find that the word "idol" (or, "idols") appears nineteen times in Ezekiel, prior to chapter 20 and verse 16. In addition to that, there are several other times in which the context infers idols, or idolatry. And paraphrases, such as *The Living Bible*, will insert "idol" or "idolatry" where the word does not literally appear in the Hebrew because it is so obvious what God meant. We are going to read only a few of these; but I'm going to be reading them out of *The Living Bible* because it is so plainly and clearly written. Ezekiel 5, verse one, begins: "*Son of dust...*" Isn't that interesting? "Son of dust"—that's all you are. That's all I am. Animated dust. God *really* humbles us.

Ezekiel 5:1-2 [Living Bible] Son of dust, take a sharp sword and use it as a barber's razor to shave your head and beard; use balances to weigh the hair into three equal parts. Place a third of it at the center of your map of Jerusalem. After your siege, burn it there. Scatter another third across your map and slash at it with a knife. Scatter the last third to the wind, for I will chase my people with the sword.

Did you notice what He said in that last verse? "I WILL chase..." It's still future! And it's happening to the church right now, because we are *THE ISRAEL OF GOD*, and Ezekiel is written to us. Let that sink in. If it doesn't sink in, then this is not going to have the kind of impact that it needs to have on us—to get us to turn around and to repent. "I WILL chase My people with the sword." We haven't been chased with the sword yet, but we have already been scattered. It's kind of interesting because even in its setting in the book of Ezekiel, Israel had already been scattered. So it's yet future.

Ezekiel 5:11 [Living Bible] For I promise you: Because you have

defiled my Temple with idols...

Is there any one here who doesn't believe that "the temple" is a symbol of the church, of the very sanctuary of God, as it were, "the holy of holies"—those in whom He literally dwells?

Ezekiel 5:11 [Living Bible] Because you have defiled my Temple with idols and evil sacrifices, therefore I will not spare you nor pity you at all.

And then he goes on to talk about some terrible punishments that are going to come; and, of course, things that are going to come upon the nations of Israel that are far worse than what's going to come upon the church.

Ezekiel 6:1-7, 9, 13 [Living Bible] Again a message came from the Lord: "Son of dust, look over toward the mountains of Israel and prophesy against them. Say to them, O mountains of Israel, hear the message of the Lord God against you and against the river and valleys. I, even I the Lord, will bring war upon you and destroy your idols. All your cities will be smashed and burned, and the idol altars abandoned. Your gods will be shattered; the bones of their worshipers will lie scattered among the altars. Then at last you will know I am the Lord... Then when they are exiled among the nations, they will remember me, for I will take away their adulterous hearts - their love of idols - and I will blind their lecherous eyes that long for other gods... When your slain lie scattered among your idols and altars on every hill and mountain and under every green tree and great oak where they offer incense to their gods - you will realize that I alone am God.

Ezekiel 8:3 [Living Bible] He put out what seemed to be a hand and took me by the hair. And the Spirit lifted me up into the sky and seemed to transport me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate, where the large idol was that had made the Lord so angry.

"Jerusalem" also is a symbol, a code name, for the church. And so God uses words like "Jerusalem", "temple" and "My house" to make sure that we get the point.

Ezekiel 8:10 [Living Bible] So I went in. The walls were covered with pictures of all kinds of snakes, and lizards and hideous creatures, besides all the various idols worshiped by the people of Israel.

So there are all kinds of idolatry. Drop down to verse 15. God says, "*I'm going to show you something even worse.*"

Ezekiel 8:15-16 [Living Bible] "Have you seen this?" he asked. "But

I will show you greater evils than these!" Then he brought me into the inner court of the Temple [Right into the heart, as it were, of His church.] and there at the door, between the porch and the bronze altar, were about twenty-five men standing with their backs to the Temple of the Lord, facing the east, worshipping the sun!

Does that imply Sunday worship? Possibly. I think without doubt He is implying idolatry taking place right in the temple—the church. Their backs are turned away from the church, the dwelling place of God, and they are worshipping the sun.

Ezekiel 9:3-5 [Living Bible] And the Lord called to the man with the writer's case, and said to him, "Walk through the streets of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who weep and sigh because of all the sins that they see around them." Then I heard the Lord tell the other men: "Follow him through the city and kill everyone whose forehead isn't marked.

Notice what is named here. This ought to send a shutter through us if, indeed, this has any application on the church at all.

Ezekiel 9:6 [The Living Bible] ...kill them all - old and young, girls, women and little children.

Sometimes we can just be, brethren, so complacent that we are absolutely certain we are going to be taken to the place of safety. God loves us. Because He loves us, He has got to be fair, equal, just—within Himself. His love is "tough love." If He didn't love us, He wouldn't punish us. But, because He does in order to be true to Himself and be God, He has to do it. It does not give Him a thrill. He derives no pleasure from it. It is a means to an end—to bring us to repentance; to ensure that we will be in His kingdom; to ensure that we are serious about the great calling that He's given to us.

Ezekiel 9:6 [The Living Bible] ...And begin right here at the Temple.
And so they began by killing the seventy elders.

That's the ministry. We are the most responsible. And if I don't do my job, as a watchman—warning, admonishing, in love—then your blood is upon my hands. We have to make the application of the scriptures; and, if the shoe fits, we have to wear it. And I say that *the evidence of the times*—the very fact that we are scattered over God's great green earth—is a pretty good indication that He has something against us. And that something is, WE ARE NOT TAKING HIM SERIOUSLY ENOUGH.

We somehow think that He's playing games; and that we can play games right back. I think we are learning that He is serious, and that He won't accept us playing games with the calling that

He has given us. Could anything greater be given to a human being than to know what we know, and to have His Holy Spirit? I don't think so, brethren.

Ezekiel 14:1-7 [The Living Bible] Then some of the elders of Israel visited me, to ask me for a message from the Lord, and this is the message that came to me to give to them: "Son of dust, these men worship idols in their hearts—should I let them ask me anything? Tell them, the Lord God says: I the Lord will personally deal with anyone in Israel who worships idols and then comes to ask my help. For I will punish the minds and hearts of those who turn from me to idols. Therefore warn them that the Lord God says: Repent and destroy your idols, and stop worshipping them in your hearts. I the Lord will personally punish everyone, whether the people of Israel or the foreigners living among you, who reject me for idols, and then comes to a prophet...

Do you know what a prophet is? He's just merely a preacher. That's all. One who is speaking under inspiration.

Ezekiel 14:7-8 [The Living Bible] ...and then comes to a prophet to ask for My help and advise. I will turn upon him and make a terrible example of him, destroying him; and you shall know I am the Lord.

Sobering, isn't it? These are the chapters that lead up to Ezekiel 20, where he goes from idolatry to Sabbath breaking as being the cause of Israel, and Judah, going into captivity. Is the Sabbath important from God's perspective? Well, He seems to think so! *The basis, of the sin of Sabbath breaking, is idolatry.* That's not too unusual because idolatry, in a general sense, is at the base of all sin.

Turn to Judges, the twenty-first chapter and verse 25. Here is the time in Israel's history that is refuted to be the most lawless and divisive of any in their history. This verse is a summary statement as to why it was this way.

Judges 21:25 In those days there was no king in Israel [Meaning that there was no authoritative voice - one voice, one leader in authority.]: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Not God's eyes—but what was right in his own eyes.

Proverbs 14:12 is a scripture, I heard so many times from Herbert Armstrong, that I know I am never going to forget it. But it catches in a very succinct way the essence of much of the problems in mankind.

Proverbs 14:12 - There is a way which seems right to a man, but the

end thereof are the ways of death.

There's only one end—but many ways to death. But, the beginning of it, is what seems right in a man's eyes—in his own mind. Is what is in a man's eyes also right with God? That's the issue. That's the issue with the Sabbath. And I think that I am on pretty strong ground when I say that the Sabbath commandment, the fourth commandment, is the one of "*the royal law*" that is considered to be least important by the bulk of mankind. It's rejected out of hand by all but a few.

So man has "*many ways*", but they all end in death. And, at the base of the "*many ways*" is idolatry, because it is man's own mind that sets up what he thinks is right, though it's not right with God.

Isaiah 58:13-14 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 of the Lord, honorable; and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways [Proverbs 14:12], nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words: THEN shall you delight yourself in the Lord; and I will cause you to ride on the high places of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

The Sabbath is to be used for seeking, and doing the will of God.

Now, brethren, I have never had a congregation quite like the Church of the Great God. Previously, I'd always pastored local congregations. In one sense, we are tied together by telephone communication into a single congregation. But what is different is that the Church of the Great God has drawn people from all over the country, and internationally, as well.

One of the things that I'm surprised about, is how many people have told me that their pastor in the Worldwide Church of God rarely, if ever, preached anything about the Sabbath. When he did, it was one sermon only; and almost nothing was covered.

On the surface, the Sabbath appears to be only for resting—a break from physical labor. Now, indeed, rest is a factor in the keeping of it; but the central purpose which should guide our intentions for the use of the day is the *developing* and *building* of our relationship with God. That is exceedingly more important than stopping work! The stopping of work only provides the *time* so that we can do what is more important—*developing the relationship with God*. The central purpose of the break from the normal routine is the getting to know Him. "Knowing Him [Jesus said] is eternal life." You want eternal life? Get to know God. That's what the Sabbath is for.

The Sabbath is a weekly, and sometimes annual, appointment of time to be devoted to Him, so that the relationship doesn't become lost in the swirl of all the other activities of life. If it's done right, nobody has an excuse for not "knowing" God.

One-seventh—not one tenth, as a tithe—but one-seventh, plus the holy days, of everybody's

life after he is called is to be devoted to seeking God. When I say one-seventh, that's a *minimum minimum* because there is time every day to do it! And there are the holy days of God, including the Feast of Tabernacles, which is eight days long including the Last Great Day.

When you start adding all of these things together, you are getting down to somewhere around one-sixth to one-fifth of our time is to be devoted to getting to know God. Once every week just to make sure as a *minimum*!

So the central purpose for the break from normal routine is getting to know Him. It is the weekly and sometimes, the annual appointments of time to be devoted to Him, so that the relationship doesn't become lost in the swirl of all of the other activities of life. And it is from the proper use of the day—in fellowshiping with Him—that the true, spiritual rest and refreshment are derived.

Now turn with me to Isaiah 40. And you can connect this directly to Isaiah 58 and verse 14. If we are using the day right, THEN [He says] "you shall delight yourself in the Lord and I will cause you to ride on the high places of the earth." Now connect this thought...

Isaiah 40:28-29 Have you not known? Have you not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, faints not, neither is weary? There is no searching of his understanding. He gives power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increases strength.

Are you tired when the Sabbath rolls around? If our relationship with God is right, that is a day to be re-energized! And it's not the physical rest that supplies the main amount of strength. It is the