

The Fourth Commandment: Idolatry

Sabbath and Idolatry

John W. Ritenbaugh

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I am going to begin this sermon by quoting from a column that was in a newspaper in 1984. I believe it came out of a Chicago newspaper because that was the area in which I was pasturing a church at that time. In this column was "Ask Me A Question," and it was written by a Catholic priest by the name of Frank Sheedy. The question was, "Why was the Sabbath changed to Sunday and called 'the Lord's Day'?" He continued the writing with, "I have been studying the Scriptures, and it seems to me the commandments are not to be changed." End of question.

I am not going to read the entire answer that this pastor gave, but I want you to hear how he begins it and how he ends it. First he says, "There is no commandment that Saturday should be the Sabbath—six days when we labor, and the seventh when we rest." He quotes Deuteronomy 5: 13 there as the commandment, and then continues with, "Notice it does not say '*Sabbath*.' It says '*seven*.' The Jews choose what we now call Saturday to be *their* Sabbath." At the end he says, "The observance of the first day [meaning Sunday] dates from the beginning of the new church." He puts in parentheses Acts 20: 7 which says, "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them."

Continuing, he says, "For some who might object that the apostles had no authority to do this, we must remember that Jesus gave Peter great power—and then quotes Matthew 16: 19—'Whatsoever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you declare loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' Thus, in their decision, the apostles clearly showed that the new law had replaced the old law, and the new law was centered on Jesus Christ."

As we go along we are going to see that this man was just about totally 99% wrong in the answer he gave. About the only right thing is that the word "Sabbath" does not appear where he initially inferred.

The priest's answer represents a clever deviation from truth that one can get away with only because the one listening has little or no respect for God and the Scriptures in the first place. If the questioner here bothered to really look up things, and he probably did, he had already come to the opinion that the commandments are not done away. He was on the right track; the priest was not.

In Romans 3 it says:

Romans 3:18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

This is at the conclusion of a vivid and fairly detailed overview of human attitude and conduct toward God, and it is given almost as though it captures and concisely sums why this

dangerously violent world is filled with what it is.

I want you to consider that anyone's conduct about or toward anything captures the essence of its perceived value to one. What this means is that if the person values the Sabbath, then his conduct for it is going to be different from that of a person's who does not perceive it to be valuable to him. He will ignore the command. If one does not believe the Sabbath is of value to him, and is of no particular importance in God's eyes, then he is not going to observe it.

I want you to turn to Romans 1. We are breaking into the middle of an argument. It is sort of an explanatory argument Paul is giving here, and it is quite detailed actually.

Romans 1:24-25 Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creation more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

Over the past several months I have stressed the importance of idolatry as a negative force drawing us away from the one true God who is the source of truth, of beauty, of goodness, and a way of life that produces right relationships by means of a relationship with Him.

If one examines the central issue of the first central commandment, one will find that the first commandment's concern is "*what* we worship." These verses in Romans 1:24-25 summarize well what the first commandment forbids, which is the worship of someone or something other than the Creator.

Worship is the devoted service one gives to what one regards above all. Worship is most assuredly not restricted to activity done on any one day of the week. As these verses show, one can give devoted service to created things as well as to the Creator. That is what he says in verse 25. When we add to this that the tenth commandment says covetousness is idolatry too, clearly amplifying that our respect and thus our devotion can be given to things other than the Creator God. Because covetousness is a form of devotion, it is therefore, by definition, a form of worship.

You surely have heard the argument that "all religions are good." Our president of the United States has said that. But brethren, that simply is not true. Based on the evidence of what it produces, would you call that fanatical religion of countries dominated by militant Islam good? I do not think so.

Let us advance this one step further. In this world's many variations of what they call "Christianity," is that good? The world's religions can be evaluated as good or bad only in relation to each other, but not one of them is good evaluated against Jesus' religion. By that I mean the one He passed on to the apostles.

It is Paul's argument here in Romans 1 that God abandoned those addressed in this chapter to uncleanness. Can the unclean produce a good religion? The term "unclean" in the *King James Version* usually indicates immorality. In most cases it strongly infers *sexual* immorality, which is what it infers here in Romans 1. But understand that "uncleanness" does not always infer

sexual immorality, but it always infers a pattern, a way or conduct that is against the law of God and abhorrent to Him.

The conclusion therefore is that any religion other than the true one is in reality, brethren, a curse. One might even be able to determine that in some contexts it is actually used as a punishment. "God gave them up," you see. It was a punishment for them to be forced, if we can look at it that way, to live according to the way they chose. The context here in verse 25 goes on to say "who changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creation more than the Creator."

I want you to look again at the first phrase of that verse: "Who changed . . ." Or it can easily be translated correctly as "exchanged." In other words, he is saying that on the one hand they had the opportunity to worship "truth," but they exchanged it for a lie. That is what the *King James Version* says, but the Greek does not say that. It says, "For *the* lie"—a specific one Paul is aiming toward here.

In this context, God and *His* way is *the* truth, and "*the lie*" is the people's idolatry. So it does not matter the way they actually committed their idolatry (what the form of the religion was), in God's eyes it was "the lie." It was one sin: idolatry. So how can that be good? It is an impossibility to change, or exchange anything God says for something else because it immediately condemns the person as exchanging truth for the lie, and what they change it to is automatically idolatry.

Overall, in this context, Paul is showing that only the Creator God can be properly worshipped. So worshipping—that is, giving one's devotion in life to someone or something other than the Creator—subtly turns the thrust and direction of one's life off the path of God's purposes. Even though that one, or things devoted to, may be otherwise harmless in and of themselves, it is a sin to give them or it that level of respect or devotion, which is idolatry, because it absolutely cannot produce anything good toward God's purpose.

You may recall that I mentioned to you before that idolatry is a sin whose fruit almost never is immediately seen. It is like a cancer that suddenly destroys by slow increments. Life's direction and course-correction must come within one's relationship with the Creator God. The wrong source will lead one astray, so keeping the first commandment requires a great deal of soul-searching evaluation of the true value of what we hold dear. Where does that value come from? That is what that commandment is after. Did it really come from the Creator God?

John 4:24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

The second commandment deals with *how* we worship. The worship of God involves the totality of life and therefore it cannot be confined to a particular location, nor can it be concentrated in merely an hour or two on *any* given day. The focus of our worship is to be on imitating Him in the totality of life.

There are to be no material aids in this because—besides no one ever having seen Him, even if one *did* see Him—no one can capture in a work of art what God is. God wants us to concentrate

on what He is, not on what He looks like.

It is not easy for human nature's strong attraction to the physical to surrender its dominance over life. It is often the first step backward from conversion to give grudging willingness to share time and energy that should be given to God to something else. However, when Jesus was asked what is the first and great commandment of the law, He said, "To love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." Anything less is going to affect the quality of our worship of God. Brethren, this is *ahuge* pinnacle requiring a lifetime of growth and overcoming, but it blends perfectly into the third commandment.

The first commandment focuses on *what* we worship. The second commandment focuses on *how* we do that worship. There are to be no material aids. It has to be by spirit and truth. The third commandment involves the *quality of our personal witness* of everything the names of God imply. His names stand for His position as the Creator, the Giver of life, of His character, His power and His offices as the Great Ruler, Sustainer, and Provider of the universe.

Matthew 28:19-20 Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name [or into the name] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

The important thing for us here is that we are baptized *into* the name of God when we go through our baptism and have hands laid on us. This occurs through the begetting by His Spirit, or as Paul put it in Romans 8, that we are sons by adoption; thus the name of God becomes our spiritual family name, and by God's adoption of us it becomes our responsibility to grow, upholding that name, bringing honor upon it by our attitudes, our words, and our deeds. This introduces our responsibility, because Isaiah 43: 8-12 says:

Isaiah 43:8-12 Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and show us former things? Let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no savior. I have declared, and have saved, and I have showed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore you are my witnesses, says the LORD, that I am God.

The church is not a great nation. It is not a military power. It is not even a cultural institution organized to change the world. The church exists solely to grow, to overcome, and to glorify God through the witness of our lives lived preparing for God's Kingdom.

The illustration Isaiah uses here is as though we are standing before a court of law and on trial, as it were. Now how is the witness made? We are going to have to go back to the book of Romans once again, chapter 10, verses 14 through 17. Those three or four verses contain a very famous verse.

Romans 10:14-17 How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our report? So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

We are all here because we heard somebody preach the gospel, and through that witness made to us God called us, and He called us to fulfill the responsibility given in Isaiah 43 where He says "You are My witnesses." It is we who testify in behalf of God, and the primary witness is not with our mouth. It is with our life. Each believer is a witness before the world of the work of his Lord Jesus Christ, and the Lord's purpose, because the witness that is made to Him changes his life forever.

God sees all. God wants that change to be witnessed not only before Him, He wants others in the world to see it, be it family, employer, neighbor, or whatever. Every one of us is witnessing as though we are on trial before these people. It is in making this witness that God's purpose is carried through personal conduct, and preaching to some extent as a body. The church also preaches. So the witness is made through those who hear and live by faith. That is what those people in Romans 1 prove. They did not believe God. They gave up truth in order to follow an idol. Are we going to do the same? Will we give up our idols in order to follow truth? If we do, we will make the witness that pleases God.

We may think it has no effect before our neighbors. God is not concerned about whether it produces conversion in *them*. He is concerned about whether or not we are following truth in our life, and if we are He will make it be effective in the way He wants it to be made.

How can one make a good witness unless one knows what to do? I am heading towards something here. How can one know what to do unless one is taught? That is what Paul is getting at in these verses in Romans 10. Brethren, this is the major purpose of the fourth commandment.

The first commandment deals with *what* we worship. The second commandment deals with *how* we worship. The third commandment begins to get into the *quality* of our worship. The fourth commandment falls right into place here. The fourth commandment was established by God to provide a means of unified instruction, and it is therefore a major player in the process of conversion and witnessing.

The remainder of this sermon is going to be roughly divided between proving that we should

keep the Sabbath, and the other fifty percent on *why* we should keep it.

Mark 2:27-28 And he [Jesus] said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.

There are a number of acts that are important to us here. The first is that the Sabbath was not made for its own sake as were the other days of the week, but it was made for the specific purpose as a service for mankind. It was made *for* man. It has a specific reason for having been made. Another way that verse can be translated is: "It was made on *account* of man." Perhaps that is a little bit clearer. One of the things this means is that the Sabbath is a specific thoughtful gift of the Creator to serve His creation. It was made for man. God created it as a gift for man. If it was to be used by mankind merely for physical rest, then any day of the seven could be used. Therefore its creation is primarily to be used by mankind to support their part in God's spiritual creation. Such a use goes far beyond merely resting one's body.

A second item is that the Sabbath was made for *man*, not just the Jews. Its intention by God is universal. It was made to ensure man's physical and spiritual well-being.

A third point is that Jesus claimed authority to teach us how to keep it; not *whether* to keep it. He did that in the explanations that preceded the verses we are looking at here. Of course His instruction is not to be limited to just that area, but that is how He began His explanation. When this whole context is taken together it shows that Jesus expected the Sabbath to be kept. It is not a matter *off*. He gave no alternative.

Nations routinely honor citizens they believe have made significant contributions to the well-being of the people of their nation by setting apart as a memorial to those great heroes days so that others will remember their contributions. God is Creator.

Exodus 31:13 Speak you also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths you shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that you may know that I am the LORD that does sanctify you.

By God's own Word He memorialized the Sabbath. But compared to any man, God's contributions to the well-being of everybody is beyond counting, beyond estimation, but one stands before all others. He is Creator; therefore everybody's life, everybody's potential hinges on that fact. The Bible begins by saying, "In the beginning *God* created." That is an awesome statement to consider. Everything in this fantastic floating greenhouse we call Earth is attributed to and a witness of His genius, His power, and His loving providence. Mankind has yet to develop his first flea! Yet if man did develop one, how much publicity would that man want? Probably a lot. "Give me a day!" What might they demand?

Let us go further back in the Bible.

Genesis 2:1-3 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all

the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

The Sabbath had a Creator. It was *made*. We are looking at the beginning of that creation. This series of verses sets the tone and establishes the first reason for the keeping of the Sabbath. The reason we keep it is because of what God did. We are to do what He did in our infantile and very weak human way. Now because *He* did this, the Sabbath has universal validity. It is from creation; not from one of the fathers, not from Moses, not from the Jews because there were no Jews, there was no Moses. There was nobody besides God, except for Adam and Eve when He made it. The opening chapters of Genesis show very clearly that Adam and Eve did not make it.

Everything points to God making a specific creative act by what He did. This is why Jesus, when He spoke there in Mark 2, expected everybody to keep the Sabbath, because God made it for man and He expected for man to use it. There were no alternatives. Does not man use almost everything that God created to live? Yes he does, and he does it without question; but the Sabbath he rejects.

Another thing: The scripture here very clearly states "*the*" seventh day, not "*a*" seventh day. Notice verse 2. "And on *the* seventh day God ended His work that He had made, and He rested on *the* seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed *the* seventh day, and sanctified it because that He had rested from all His work which God created and made."

Understand that this is not the theological beginning of keeping the Sabbath. We are going to turn to Exodus 20, where the commandments are given. I want you to note what it says in verse 11.

Exodus 20:11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Exodus 20:11 shows the keeping of it as a *religious* day of worship. Worship has its foundation firmly attached to Genesis 1 and 2. There is a direct line from Genesis 2 to Exodus 20. So right in the commandments it points right back to the creation.

The next thing is that the word "Sabbath" does not literally mean "to rest." It means "to stop." It means "to cease." Resting is the result of stopping what one does on the other six days. God could have rested or stopped His activity at any time, or not even rested at all. Are you getting the point? This was *ad deliberate* act. God does not get tired. This was done with deliberate forethought. He stopped the physical creation of the first six days, and as a man would do because he stopped, He rested. He simply did not do anything that day except in terms of the kind of work that He did on the other six days.

We have to think about the deliberateness here. He could have stopped on the sixth day. He could have stopped on the fifth day or the fourth day. He could have created everything in one

day, and then stopped and created the Sabbath on the second day. He deliberately, step by step, laid out a plan, and when He got to the seventh day, He stopped deliberately to set an example for man.

"Just as surely as you use the ocean and all the fish in it, and just as surely as you use the cattle I have created, and all the green things that are out there, and the earth, and all the dirt and the microbes, I want you to use the Sabbath." And then He points out the theological reason in Exodus 20. "I want you to worship *Me* on that day. You are to stop what you are doing on the other six days, and on the seventh you are supposed to have a one-on-one relationship with *Me*. It is for your good. In fact it is the most important day of the week."

Attention is specifically drawn to what He did on the seventh day, even as specific attention is drawn to what He did on the other six days. So in reality I think we can honestly look that the Sabbath is the very crown of the creation week. No other day received God's blessing. No other day was sanctified in the manner the Sabbath was sanctified, and so that day topped off His creative activities by creating a very specific period of time, sanctified for rest, or for stopping.

On the Sabbath the creating continued, but it took a different form from what it did on the other days, though in this case the form was not outwardly visible. In reality, as one gradually learns, the Sabbath symbolizes to His children the fact that God is still creating. You will find a confirming verse on this in John 5:16-17 where Jesus said, "My Father has been working from the beginning, and He continues to work." He is working on His spiritual creation which the Sabbath symbolizes.

The Sabbath is an integral part of the process of creation. The physical aspect was finished at the end of the sixth day, but the spiritual aspect began with the creation of the Sabbath, and it continues to this day. At the end of the sequence of physical creation God created and sanctified an environment to play a role in producing eternal and everlasting life. God shows, through the creation of the Sabbath, that the life-producing and sustaining process is not complete with just a physical environment.

The Sabbath plays an important role in producing spiritual life—a quality of life with a dimension the physical only cannot supply. No other day can be used with the quality of effectiveness as the Sabbath toward that end. There is a valid reason for this. The Sabbath is not a mere afterthought of a tremendous creation, but is a deliberate memorializing of the most enduring thing that man knows: time. Sabbath time plays an especially important role in God's spiritual creation. Through the Sabbath, it is as if God says, "Look at what I have made, and consider, children, I am not done yet. I am reproducing *Myself*, and you can be part of my spiritual creation."

The Sabbath was created by God stopping His physical creating, thus setting the example for *man* to rest. He also significantly blessed and sanctified the Sabbath. As I said earlier, He did this in no other day, and yet men argue against the keeping of it, even though Jesus, like the Father, kept it. There is a question. Of the ten, does man consider the Sabbath the least of the commandments?

Are you aware that the word "sanctified" from Genesis 2:3 is the same word, just modified to have the correct tense, as the word "holy" in the commandments? It is. In Genesis 2 God *made*

it holy, and in Exodus 20 we are told to *keep* it holy. He made it holy. We are to *keep* it holy. By our efforts in preparing for it and keeping it, we are to keep it clean.

Man, as compared to God, cannot confer holiness to the degree that God does. Any other day of worship is merely a man-made holiness and is not holy in the way God's Sabbaths are holy. This means the Sabbath is worthy of respect, of deference, even devotion not given to other periods of time. It was set apart for sacred use because it is derived from God.

The implication of the usage of "holy" is this: It implies "different." Anything holy is different from other things that it might be compared to, even other things of the same general kind. It is different. The verbal root of the word "holy" actually means "to cut."

Living in the United States we are fairly familiar with cowboys cutting a calf from a herd. You see, he is sanctifying it. He is setting it apart from other calves in the herd. They do the same thing with horses. That is what the word "holy" implies. But there is one more thing that can be added, and that is that the physical "holy" can actually mean even more explicitly "a cut above." In other words, *better* than."

If God makes something holy, He not only sets it apart, He confers on it a spiritual 'something' that makes it better than other things. It is from this that the sense of cleanliness comes into the word "holy." It is not just a setting apart, but it is also making whatever God blesses a cut above or *clean* in a way that man cannot make something clean. You see, man can declare that something is sacred, or he can set it apart, but he cannot make it clean. So man can make Sunday set apart, or sanctified, but he cannot make it holy in the way God does.

When God makes something holy, He makes that object different. It may seem like it is the same, but it is not. Because God did it, it is now different from other things that may *look* the same, like time. Time on Friday does not look any different from time on the Sabbath; but it is, because God had a hand in making the Sabbath holy in a way that He did not confer on the other days. This day is important to His purpose. Men try to make a change, but it is risky to say the least.

I want to show you an example of what I have just mentioned to you.

Exodus 3:1-5 Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground.

I can guarantee you (I think), that the ground where the bush was burning and God was there,

looked no different from miles and miles of ground all around it. It was the fact that God conferred His holiness on that ground around Moses, who could tell no different. I am sure Moses threw off his sandals and knelt on the ground, even though it did not look any different. That is the principle that is at work here. This is what makes the Sabbath different from other days.

God has conferred something on that time that He has not conferred on other days, and it is to be respected even though it looks to everybody like it is the same as any other day; but it is not. You see, we are dealing here with something spiritual, and spiritual things are not physically discerned. They are *spiritually* discerned. Even Moses had to be told, "Hey! There's a difference, Moses, between this ground and that ground." He could not see it. He had to be told.

We can keep the Sabbath seriously because God has told *us*, and we believe it, just like Moses did. That is the difference. It is what God works in *our* lives that motivate us to treat it in a holy manner, just like it was what God did to Moses that made *him* treat it differently from other ground that was all around it.

Amos 3:3 Can two walk together, except they be agreed?

If one wants to be in God's presence in this special way, no other day will do it. It has got to be the Sabbath. God has an appointment with us to meet with Him at this time. It is a *timedifferent* from other time, even as your appointment time, let us say, with a dentist is different from other times in your life, and is also different from other people's appointment time with the dentist. The principle is at work here. The dentist tells you, "I have time open." You say, "Good, I can make that time." But your husband or wife may call in fifteen minutes later, and they are not going to get the same time as you were given. They are going to have different appointments. That is the kind of principle that is at work here, only in our case with God it is faith that is at work.

Turn now to Exodus 31:17. This is still talking about the Sabbath.

Exodus 31:17 It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

Beginning in verse 12 is a special covenant: the Sabbath covenant. Everybody recognizes it as such. This special covenant comes right in the midst of the instruction regarding the building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness.

Exodus 35:1-3 And Moses gathered all the congregation of the children of Israel together, and said unto them, These are the words which the LORD has commanded, that you should do them. Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be to you an holy day, a sabbath of rest to the LORD: whosoever does work therein shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your

habitations upon the sabbath day.

We just saw in Exodus 31 a special Sabbath covenant, but it is important that you notice this in light of what is going on in the larger context. The context is the instruction that God gave to Moses for the building of the Tabernacle. Even though these people were employed by God to construct the most important edifice that, to that time in their lives, they had ever constructed, and it was going to require a great deal of their time and effort, and it was directly connected to their devoted worship of God.

Exodus 35 makes very clear that they were not to desecrate the Sabbath—this holy time—by working on it. The issuance of that special reminder is there because they had already shown they were really eager to do it, and so in order to caution them and slow them down, He said, "Wait a minute! When the Sabbath comes, it's more important than that building."

I am sure that this was hard for some people to understand, because a building you could see. "Look at what I'm building there! That shows I love God. I am devoted to Him." God said they were not to do any work on the Sabbath day, that this space of time was more important than that building. He said, "You are not to build a fire." The fire of course would have been intended by them to do work melting metal so they could do their decorations and so forth, making nuts and bolts for putting together the Tabernacle. God said "No. The Sabbath is more important than that building. Don't you dare work on it."

We have a special covenant, and that Sabbath is the sign of that covenant between God and His people. At the time this covenant was made it was with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so forth, but for us it is with "the Israel of God"—the spiritual Israel that is possessed and owned by God.

It says that the Sabbath is a sign. You have to consider a sign for just a little bit because it adds to the importance of the Sabbath. A sign identifies the occupation for the purpose of, or to give direction. A sign brings people together who share interest in a common purpose. A sign can be a pledge of mutual fidelity and commitment. Signs are used by organizations to designate membership so that members can recognize one another, like with a secret handshake—a sign to one another saying, "Hey! I'm your brother."

In *our* case the Sabbath serves as an external and visible bond that at one and the same time unites us and sanctifies us from everybody else. You know this is true because almost everybody else in the world of Christianity keeps Sunday, or nothing, or Friday in the case of Islam; but it is not the Sabbath. To me that is very interesting. It is by the Sabbath an Israelite knows that God is sanctifying *him*. Keep that in mind.

When a called person repents and begins keeping the Sabbath, God is sanctifying that person as well as the day. The Sabbath is the sign that the person is being sanctified. I feel sure that anybody who has kept both the Sabbath and Sunday knows this. Sunday does not sanctify anybody from anything. Sunday sets no one apart from the world.

God has a purpose that He is working out, and He has made a tremendous investment in us in the creation and in the death of His Son, and the Sabbath is a major means by which He

protects His investment.

If the only reason He created the Sabbath was to give us physical rest, any old time would do. Unconverted people can keep the Sabbath, but because they are unconverted it really is not sanctifying them. The two have to go together. This is why ultimately it is the manner or how the person is keeping it that becomes the real sign. This is how the witness is done.

The Sabbath is used by God to teach the person, to give him or her understanding, to help in the building of his or her character so that they know more and more truth, and as they accumulate truth, it sanctifies them. They are getting it on the Sabbath. They carry through on the other six days of the week, and this whole mix is working together for the person to witness for God before the world to show what this meant when Israel, who had the Sabbath, did not keep the Sabbath as they should have done, and did not keep it at all.

How does this sanctification take place? It takes place because God uses the Sabbath to educate His children in His way. That is its specific purpose. This is part of the way His people then become prepared to witness for Him.

What if a basketball coach told his players to come to the gym at such and such a time on such and such a day, but some of the players decided to go to a different gym on a different day and practice under a different coach? I do not think that would work out very well, do you? Not at all.

I have heard basketball commentators say that players on a team begin to take on the qualities and philosophies of the coach. I have heard people who involved themselves with athletics say that they can tell that a certain player has been coached by a certain coach. They say that this player has "the John Wooden way" about him, or "the John Thompson way" about him. What has happened is that the player has taken on the image of the coach's way. It becomes a part of his thinking, not just on a basketball court, but it becomes part of his thinking at other times in life as well. Do you know what has happened? He has become sanctified by the coach, and the coach's way, the coach's thinking patterns, and the coach's attitudes.

I have heard Mike Krzyzewski, who coaches Duke, being interviewed on the radio. He said that the most difficult thing a coach has to do is to get the player to accept and submit to his way of coaching. If the kids will buy it, the chances are great they will have a good team, but if the kids will not buy it, they will not become sanctified. As a man he has had a lot of success, and that is the principle that is involved here.

If a person is by faith keeping God's Sabbath, our coach is Jesus Christ, and the image of our coach begins to become impressed upon us. That is how important the Sabbath is. It cannot be done on other days because God has set up a pattern He will follow through with. The appointment is for the Sabbath.

Every week we ask God to be here. Are we just mumbling words? I hope not, because God will respond with what He can do. So the Sabbath then was created because it both enhances and protects one's relationship with God. It provides a witness to God, the person keeping it, and to the world, and it exists to keep us pointed in the right direction in a proper frame of mind, and provides us with the right material to negotiate the way to the Kingdom of God.

Brethren, we live in a grubby, grasping, material world, and every day has a built-in bias

toward material things, and with human nature ever present within us it is hard to avoid the material things. The Sabbath almost forces us to think about the spiritual, of God, and of His ongoing spiritual creation in us. It presents us with the opportunity to consider the why of life, to get our head on straight with the right orientation so that we can properly use our time the other six days. The Sabbath, brethren, is the kernel, the nucleus from which the proper worship—that is, our response to God—grows.

Existential philosophers tell us that life is absurd. I just saw the movie "Expelled" within the last couple of weeks. This movie really impresses on the thinking of the person watching that movie that life, to them, is absurd, and that life is nothing but a prelude to death, to nothingness. But the keeping of the Sabbath is in fact a celebration of just the opposite. It is all about life. It is all about God's creative process that is continuing, and that He is creating in us His spiritual image.

Life indeed may be stressful, harried, and sometimes even frightening, but brethren, life is *not* absurd. It has a point to it. It has a purpose. It is a prelude to life on an infinitely greater and higher level. The more we become like Him, the more sanctified we are from the world, and it is in experiencing it as a refreshing and an elevating of the mind that we have a tiny foretaste of what is to come.

It is interesting that the Sabbath was the first commandment that God specifically revealed to the Israelites. The commandments are given in Exodus 20, but the Sabbath is dealt with in Exodus 16. God used the manna to teach a spiritual lesson. "Don't work on that day! There will be no manna falling on that day. I don't even want you to go out and do the work necessary for gathering it. I will make sure that what you gather on the sixth day will last for two days." Trust enters into the picture.

The Sabbath is a wonderful free gift from God to give us assurance that we can be in His Kingdom in the image of His Son Jesus Christ.

We are going to conclude in Ezekiel 20, which gives us a pretty good idea of how important this day is to God and to us.

Ezekiel 20:1-8 And it came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth month, the tenth day of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to enquire of the LORD, and sat before me. Then came the word of the LORD unto me, saying, Son of man, speak unto the elders of Israel, and say unto them, Thus says the Lord GOD; Are you come to enquire of me? As I live, says the Lord GOD, I will not be enquired of by you. Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Cause them to know the abominations of their fathers: And say unto them, Thus says the Lord GOD; In the day when I chose Israel, and lifted up my hand unto the seed of the house of Jacob, and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up my hand unto them, saying, I am the LORD your God; In the day that I lifted up my hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land that I had espied for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands: Then said I unto them, Cast you away every man the abominations of his

eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.

We began this sermon in Romans 1 where the issue was idolatry. We are going to close it with the issue being idolatry, with something else added to it.

These elders came before God. What was their question, or questions brethren? It can only be ascertained by God's reply. There actually might have been more than one question, but overall the questions seemed to be, "Why are we having all this trouble?" "What is the problem?" Remember, they were in captivity. This is talking about Israelites, not the Jews. The Israelites—the Ten Northern Tribes—were in captivity. "When can we expect a return to Jerusalem?"

Verse 7 is important. "The abomination of his eyes" literally means "the *delight* of his eyes." I will turn that around for you so that it is more understandable. It means "the delight of *their* eyes"—the Israelites' eyes—was an abomination to God. They did what seemed right to them. They did what was pleasurable to them, but to God what was pleasurable to them was idolatry and rebellion. But the Israelites look at it favorably. "Look at all this fun we're having" kind of thing, whatever.

That brief phrase contains two exceedingly different perspectives, because it nailed down what God had against them. It was their idolatry. The "light of their eyes" was the idol they looked at and were devoted to, but there is yet more contained within this chapter as God continued on with His answers. Verse 10 says:

Ezekiel 20:10-14 Wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them my statutes, and showed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them. Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them. But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness: they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and my sabbaths they greatly polluted: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them. But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out.

Brethren, to God idolatry and Sabbath-breaking went hand in hand. There is an important lesson here. Sabbath-breaking *was* idolatry because they were using it in the devotions to *their* end, and as they broke the Sabbath, it intensified their idolatry. The Sabbath was given so

Israel would know the true God so they could fulfill their purpose, which was to witness for God before the world to learn more of His purpose, to work to build character so that they would be born into God's Kingdom; but they failed miserably, totally. On the other hand, God accomplished what He set out to do in bringing them into their own land only to uphold the reputation of His name.

Ezekiel 20:16 Because they despised my judgments, and walked not in my statutes, but polluted my sabbaths: for their heart went after their idols.

Ezekiel 20:18-20 But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk you not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols: I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God.

He says the same thing in verses 24 and 25 and 27.

Ezekiel 20:24-25 Because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted my sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols. Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live. . . .

Ezekiel 20:27 Therefore, son of man, speak unto the house of Israel, and say unto them, Thus says the Lord GOD; yet in this your fathers have blasphemed me, in that they have committed a trespass against me.

The point for you and me is that Sabbath-breaking and idolatry go hand in hand. If we commit idolatry, we are going to break His Sabbath. If we break His Sabbath, we are going to commit idolatry. You begin to see the importance of the Sabbath to God and the importance that it is to serve in our lives.

The best protection against idolatry is to keep God's Sabbaths. That is the lesson. It is in the Sabbath, which God has sanctified and continues to sanctify His people, that He instructs us in His way and fills us, as it were, with His Spirit that changes us into the image of His Son, and greater and more perfect obedience, and the right attitudes we need to glorify Him. The Sabbath is a wonderful gift of God to keep idolatry out of our lives.