

I am so excited to see some of you this Sunday! It has been a long time, too long. I realize that for many of you it will be even longer before you feel comfortable returning to public worship services. That is completely understandable. I want you to feel confident in your decision.

As one might expect, this pandemic has become simply one more thing that causes division amongst friends, family, and even brothers and sisters in Christ. We are in an age in which thoughts, words, phrases, and actions, are all heavily criticized and politicized. Christians must rise above this, being salt and light in a dark and decaying world.

I have the tremendous privilege of being your pastor. Jesus has given me the honor of appointing me to care for your soul. That means I'm not writing as a doctor, concerned chiefly with your physical wellbeing, nor am I writing as a politician, concerned chiefly with your approval of me. I'm writing as your pastor, concerned chiefly with your faithful obedience to Jesus.

First, I want to share with you how the recent developments have impacted our plans for reopening.

Our decision to hold off on gathering until the beginning of July was based on a number of reasons. One of those reasons was because we knew that the first weekend in July would mark both the end of the St. Joseph County health order, requiring masks to be worn in public settings, as well as the beginning of Indiana's final phase of reopening, which would mean no restrictions of any sort. We wanted our return to public worship to feel as normal as possible in our world of new normals.

However, on Monday the St. Joseph County Health Department issued an extension of the health order until September 7. This order requires that masks be worn in public places by anyone over the age of 2. Due to the extension of this order and the recent spike in cases in our area, we are making the following adjustments to our reopening plan.

1. We will require all staff and volunteers to wear masks while serving.
2. We will ask that all people in attendance wear masks.
3. We will not offer Kids Ministry until at least the start of the school year in August.
  - This decision is based on a number of factors that include having a number of volunteers who are not yet comfortable returning on Sundays as well as having to retrain volunteers for proper classroom procedures now that masks are required.
4. We will have two services on Sunday at 9:00 and 11:00.
  - The 9:00 will be our Live Stream service for those who are worshipping with us from home. In order to create the best production environment for our video and audio feed, I'm asking you to please not attend this service with your kids. This will allow us to create the best worship experience for both those in the room as well as those who are at home. If you do not have kids attending worship with you I ask that you please attend this service.
  - The 11:00 service will be our Family Friendly Service for those of you who want to worship in person with your kids. I will preach the same sermon as the early service, but we will rearrange and shorten the service in order to help parents with smaller children. The sermon will be at the beginning of the service, after only one song, so that hopefully your kids have not yet gotten restless. A shortened set of songs will follow the message allowing this service to be shorter in duration. If you would like to attend on Sundays with your kids I ask that you please attend this service.
  - In both the 9:00 and 11:00 services we will have overflow seating available in the Delta. The Delta will provide greater space for social distancing where you can still worship in the presence of others while watching the service on our Live Stream.
  - Please know that my request for you to attend a specific service based on whether or not you are bringing your kids with you is based on my love for every member of our church and my desire that no one—adults, parents, students, kids, and those watching at home—feel excluded during this time. It is as important to me for us to create a great worship experience on Live Stream as it is for us to create a great worship experience for those who are present.

While I had hoped for the pandemic to have improved, allowing us to return to a more normal Sunday experience, I trust in God's providence and therefore believe that in his wisdom he intends this for our good.

Next, I want to encourage us as Christians in how we respond to these recent developments, not only in our church, but also in our community as we live as faithful witnesses to Christ.

I believe that it is in times like this that we discover just how far the gospel has made it into the fabric of our lives. Discipleship is learning from Jesus how to be like Jesus. As Christians we must respond to everything in our lives with one simple question, "How would Jesus respond to this if he were in my shoes?" That's it. How we respond to that question, not just with the words we use to answer, but in the actions we take to fulfill it, reveals the truth of our claims to be disciples of Jesus.

So how should we, as disciples of Jesus, respond to the county health order requiring us to wear masks and practice social distancing? Or, how would Jesus respond if he lived in St. Joseph County?

Thankfully we don't have to speculate.

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

God has given us, in his word, clear instruction for every area of our lives. Here are five ways that Scripture speaks to us about our current situation.

1. *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.* (Romans 13:1)

**Scripture commands us to obey governing authorities.** Our local health authorities have mandated that we wear a mask to stop the spread of COVID and thereby protect the most vulnerable in our communities. God has mandated that I obey the governing authorities that he has put in place as long as they have not asked me to do something immoral. There is nothing immoral about asking someone to protect others. I'm happy to wear a mask in order to honor God by acknowledging that he rules the world.

2. *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,* (Philippians 2:14-15)

**Scripture commands us not to grumble.** This command is in the context of how we conduct ourselves as his children among unbelievers, among whom we shine as lights. Part of what it means to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) is not grumbling because in Scripture grumbling is complaining about God's providence over our lives. When I grumble I am saying that God is doing a bad job at managing my life. I'm happy to wear a mask without grumbling in order to demonstrate to unbelievers that God is wise.

3. *Rejoice in the Lord always...I rejoiced in the Lord greatly...not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* (Philippians 4:4a, 10a, 11-13)

**Scripture commands us to rejoice in the Lord always.** The secret to always rejoicing is to be content. The secret to being content is to trust Jesus to strengthen you in every circumstance of life. Contrary to the way this verse is often quoted, doing all things through Christ is not about accomplishing something amazing; it is about being content in the face of dire circumstances. I'm happy to wear a mask while being content and rejoicing in the Lord always.

4. *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.* (Philippians 2:3-4)

**Scripture commands us to count others more significant than ourselves and to look after their own interests above our own.** This text goes straight to the heart of the matter. The purpose of wearing a mask is not to keep me from getting COVID, but to keep me from potentially giving someone else COVID if I were asymptomatic and didn't even know I was doing so. I'm happy to wear a mask in humility counting others more significant than myself. I'm happy to wear a mask as a means of demonstrating to others that I value their interests above my own.

5. *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* (John 13:34-35)

**Scripture commands us to love one another as Christ has loved us.** We often speak of loving our neighbors as ourselves, but Jesus demands even more from his disciples in the way they treat one another. He says that it is not enough to love a fellow believer the way we love ourselves, we must love them the way he has loved us. How did Jesus love us? He inconvenienced himself for us by suffering on our behalf. I'm happy to wear a mask, inconveniencing myself for others as a means of loving others as Christ has loved me.

This is what it looks like to think as a Christian. It means that we resist the urge to measure everything by cultural rhetoric, political persuasion, and selfish motives. We bring every matter with us to Scripture and we seek the mind of Christ. We ask how Christ would respond to any given situation and then we do so accordingly.

Do I like wearing a mask when I go places? No. Does it fog up my glasses? Yes. Do I sometimes feel like my eyes burn after wearing it for 30 minutes in the store? Yes. Will I have to do this for the rest of my life? No. Will I have to live with the witness I have given to others for the rest of my life? Yes.

When I am asked my opinion of wearing a mask, I do not wage into medical or political or conspiratorial conversations. I talk about the gospel. I talk about the goodness of Jesus to me. I talk about his willingness to die for me so that I might live. I talk about my desire to do the same for others.

We do not exist to make statements about ourselves. We exist to make a single statement about Jesus...He is glorious.

I know this is a challenging time for everyone, filled with tremendous uncertainties that give rise to numerous fears. You are close to my heart. I am praying for you.

I leave you with the comforting words of our great King...*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.* (John 16:33)