How to Love Your Neighbor during COVID-19: Should You Wear a Mask?

Backdrop: The Biblical and Obvious Truth

Do you think all the instructions of Jesus and all the Commandments in the Bible are of equal importance? Or are some more important than others? Let's see what Jesus said about this. When Jesus was asked 'what is the greatest commandment', without hesitation he answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matt 22:37-38). And without being further prompted, he immediately followed with the second greatest commandant, "'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments" (Matt 22:39-40). The fact that Jesus mentioned these "two greatest commandments" in all three synoptic Gospels (cf. Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27-28) shows its importance in Jesus' teaching. All the Old Testament laws are summed up in the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Rom 13:8-10). So, it is clear that "Loving God" and "loving our neighbor as ourselves" are the most important Biblical instructions and are not optional for Christians (1 John 5:2-3; Col 3:14); these should be held as paramount for anyone claiming to follow Jesus.

As Christians, if we say that we love God, but don't love people around us, then we are liars, only loving God in theory (1 John 4:20-21). In fact, loving our neighbor and our fellow Christian is called out as being even more important than practicing our individual freedoms (1 Cor 9:19-20); those not loving their neighbor are living in the flesh, not the Spirit (Gal 5:13-16). This love for one another must be very practical, not only in our sayings, but in our actions (1 John 3:16-18).

Loving Others During a Global Pandemic

So, the question is, during the global coronavirus pandemic in which we find ourselves, how can we obey this most fundamental command of the living God to love others? Let me suggest a few ways.

First, we can love others by loving ourselves (Eph 5:29; Prov 11:17) and taking steps not to be infected with the coronavirus, such as practicing good hygiene (like washing our hands and not touching our face) and practicing social distancing (when appropriate). Christians through the ages have been called to take care of the sick; if you do, try not to become infected yourself. How can we care for others if we ourselves are sick, in the hospital, or possibly even die? How can I love others if I am contagious and spreading this virus to others? How am I loving the elderly or immuno-compromised if I might give them a disease that may take their lives?

Next, we can love others by visiting the lonely and encouraging others (1 Thess 5:11,14; Heb 3:13; Matt 25:36; James 1:27). These days many people are either forced to stay at home or are choosing to self-quarantine due to safety concerns. Some are lonely and depressed, having lost much of the important social interaction and fellowship needed to remain healthy, vibrant, and full of faith. (There is strong evidence to suggest that loneliness and social isolation puts people at higher risk of suicide and serious illnesses.) We can visit people either physically, practicing appropriate hygiene or possibly social distancing, or visit people virtually, using technology like a phone call, FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, etc.

We can also love our neighbor by helping them financially (Luke 3:11; Eph 4:28; 1 Tim 6:17-18; James 2:15-16). Many people have lost their jobs, had a decrease in salary or reduced hours, and are suffering financially, not able to pay bills or put food on the table. Those who have plenty should care for others financially or help in other practical ways to provide for those in need.

The Controversial Mask

But what about wearing a mask? For reasons that won't be discussed here, to some, wearing a mask has become a controversial or political issue. Most people seem to believe the information on mainstream media (coming from the World Health Organization [WHO] and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]), which states that wearing a mask helps in not spreading coronavirus to others, and may even help the wearer from contracting the virus. These are most likely people who find it reasonable to obey the local government's guidelines about wearing a mask and practicing social distancing. Then there are those who have heard alternate information and may believe some or all of the following: masks aren't effective; being forced to wear a mask is infringing on their personal liberties; not wearing a mask is making their political ideologies known; and not believing that the government has any right to force us to wear one. This paper will not discuss the merits of these different positions but seeks to answer the question about how to love your neighbor in the midst of this divided and confusing situation.

In some circumstances, the decision to "wear a mask or not" is an easy one. If you are a person who always wears a mask when you can't maintain safe social distancing, and you are meeting with people who feel the same way, then "wearing a mask when everyone else is" would be the right choice. Likewise, if you are a person who chooses not to wear a mask, and you are meeting with a group of individuals who hold to that same conviction, then "not wearing a mask" is perfectly acceptable. (But keep in mind that if you contact others in a way that spreads the virus to large numbers of people, and the hospitals in your area run out of capacity to take care of severely ill patients, that is definitely not loving your neighbor!)

However, the difficulty comes when you have people of opposite convictions who are meeting together. If you are a person who refuses to wear a mask, but you go into a store and everyone around you is wearing one because the store requires it, how should you respond? Does loving those in your community mean standing your ground and not wearing a mask, or should you wear one for their sake? Or, let's say a small Christian church or Bible Study group decides to meet together for fellowship. Half of the group is convinced that wearing masks help keep the disease from spreading, and half are convinced that there is no need to wear them (for whatever reason). How can these Christians honor the Lord and love one another? In addressing these situations, we first must step back and talk about a Christian's identity in Christ.

Our Most Fundamental Identity

First of all, we should understand and acknowledge that our true identity is that of being "in Christ" (I Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:17), not in whether we wear a mask or not. Knowing that "we are in Christ, and Christ is in us" (2 Cor 13:5; Col 1:27), is the most important identity-claim we can make. Knowing we are Christ's body (Rom 12:5) and that the most fundamental command from the Living God is that we love Him and one another, then we should be able to make a very explicit and clear statement that "we will not let 'wearing masks or not' divide us as Christians or hinder us from loving our neighbors!" Further, we are not first Republicans, Democrats, or Independents; we are members of Christ! We must recognize this most essential truth and admit our human tendency to divide over non-essential beliefs or practices. We must humble ourselves (Matt 18:4; Rom 12:16; James 4:6), listen to others (James 1:19), and decide not to divide over this matter, which is clearly a "non-essential" part of the Christian belief and practice.

Loving our neighbor, including our fellow brother or sister in Christ, means that we should not criticize or judge someone who has a conviction contrary to our own (Rom 14:4,13). There are very legitimate reasons one would choose to wear a mask, and there are legitimate reasons not to wear one. We can't assume that a person who chooses to wear a mask is just ignorant, fearful, compromising their freedoms, or choosing to make a political statement. Nor can we assume the one not wearing a mask is rebelling against authority, or a conspiracy theorist, or self-centered. Two logical and mature Christians may reach opposite conclusions on this matter based on personal and family circumstances, the knowledge they have gained by reading about the issue, the online sources they are listening to, and their background experiences.

Rather than selfishly treating others with contempt, we should treat one another with kindness and patience, embracing one another as members of Christ's body. We should sincerely seek to understand why the person takes on a different view than our own. We may even be required to humble ourselves, take up our cross, die to ourselves, and care for the other person's needs above our own, like Jesus did (Phil 2:8; 2 Cor 5:14-15; Eph 5:21)! (Is it an option to not live that way?!) Being a member of the body of Christ and loving one another is a much stronger bond of unity than forcing my opinions or practices on someone else, or only choosing to associate with people that think and act the same way I do.

Loving with Mask Wearing

The wisdom and compassion of Christ leads me to believe that the issue of mask-wearing should be treated like the controversy of "eating and drinking" in Romans 14 (or the matter of "food sacrificed to idols" in 1 Corinthians 8) and that the stronger ones should take care of the weaker ones. Romans 14 strongly argues for the fact that none of us lives or dies to himself, but to Christ; therefore, we should not judge or despise one another based on differing convictions. However, the strongest statements in this chapter are, "each of us will give an account of himself to God," and "we must … determine never to place an obstacle or trap before a brother or sister," and "if your brother or sister is distressed because of what you … [do], you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy by your … [actions] someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let what you consider good be spoken of as evil" (Rom 14:12-16). If my brother or sister (or unbelievers in my community) believes that those around them must wear a mask and/or maintain social distancing (for whatever reason!), then why wouldn't I humble myself, give up my personal rights, and choose to wear a mask so I could fellowship with or minister Christ to that person!? That is love; that shows maturity in Christ; and that is God's will for the sake of the oneness of the body of Christ, or for leading others to know the Living God.

Furthermore, as Christ's representatives in our communities, are we more concerned about exercising our own rights (to not wear a mask) than about loving our neighbors? Or are we most concerned about pouring out the love and compassion of the Living God on the hurting people around us, and leading them to know the love of the Savior? What actions speak the love of Christ when we go into a grocery store? Am I loving my neighbor by not wearing a mask into the store, in which I might be rebuffed by store employees or by other shoppers? Does that behavior invite respect from others and give me a voice to share Christ's love with them? I think not.

For those of you who cannot wear a mask due to legitimate medical reasons, and you find yourself in a situation where not wearing a mask would show contempt for fellow members of Christ's body or to those in your community, then why not be the mature one and maintain social distancing so

as to not offend your brothers and sisters, and your neighbors? This is genuinely loving your neighbor and obeying God's command and his will for Christ's body.

However, to those who feel that everyone should wear a mask around each other, but who find yourselves among a group of believers who refuse to wear a mask because of their personal convictions, then rather than causing division in the body of Christ, maybe you should stay away physically and participate in the fellowship remotely. In this way we can maintain the love and oneness in the body of Christ and give God an opportunity to work on all our hearts and mature our understanding of God's will for the church, His bride.

The Real Issue

As you may realize by now, this paper is not really about masks at all. It is about asking us all to examine our hearts and lives, to see if we understand the words of Jesus and the message of the Living God about loving others. Do we take seriously Jesus' command to share his message of grace and to make disciples of all people? Do we truly value the bride of Christ above our own petty preferences? Do we see the importance of the oneness of the body of Christ? Will we give up our own individual rights for the sake of winning others to Christ and building up his Body? Will we obey Jesus' highest command to love one another?

Obviously, there are times when it would be appropriate to separate from an unrepentant, sinning brother/sister. And surely, I am not advocating for compromising the truth of the gospel for the sake of embracing people with cultish or heretical beliefs. However, as sinful and imperfect humans we often jump to the conclusion that dividing or despising others is the right way, rather than doing what Paul says, that those who are spiritual should restore those who have fallen into sin.

And to be very clear: "wearing a mask or not" is not one of the issues to be divided over! We should be unified on the essentials of the gospel and extend grace and act in love towards others, in all non-essential items. We should use these difficult times as an opportunity to grow in our faith and be built up as living stones, growing into the fullness of the one who fills all in all (1 Pet 2:5; Eph 1:23; 3:19). At the end of this pandemic, will you end up having grown in grace, being a more mature believer, leading people to know Christ, working as a person building the church, and preparing the Bride of Christ? Or will you find yourself opposing Jesus because you didn't take up the cross of Christ, didn't humble yourself, but instead drove people away from Jesus, caused division in the Body, and thus despised the Bride of Christ?

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." 2 Cor 5:10 (NIV)