**“Is Not Wearing a Facemask Christian?” OCTOBER 2020**

In this time of Covid-19 Pandemic, it is an absurd understatement to say that life is now a *new normal*. There is nothing normal about it! Everything in our lives has changed from how we greet one another to how and when we carry out our vocations to whether our children should go to school or even how or if we gather together to worship. The fear that we will either contract this new and purported highly contagious and deadly virus or that we will somehow transmit it to others has consumed our every waking moment.

Of course, we all have a legitimate concern concerning the spread of this new virus. However, thanks to the hysteria being whipped up by the mainstream media, politicians seeking election and even to a certain extent the general population, many people have become hypercritical of others as to whether or not they are complying with the manifold and often daily fluctuating mandates and guidelines being imposed upon our society by our civic leaders and local health officials. In an attempt to coerce people to comply, even Jesus’ exhortation to *“love your neighbor as yourself”* is frequently being leveled as an indictment against those who are choosing, for whatever reason, to not comply with some or all of these new societal “laws.” For example, I’ve personally heard the charge that if you don’t wear a facemask when you are in public then you are not loving your neighbor and you are not being Christian!

Is such a charge legitimate? Is it Biblical? I might even ask, is this criticism of others itself being *Christian*? Think of it this way; if Jesus Himself caught you or me not wearing a facemask would He really say to us, “*Depart from Me. I do not know you?”*

First, let us examine if not abiding by a man-made rule can ever be a sin. We all probably would agree that a mask mandate is not the Eleventh Commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai nor is it articulated anywhere in The Holy Bible.

That’s not to say, however, that not obeying such a mandate could not still be a sin. Let me explain. It is safe to say that the vast majority of us would agree that getting an abortion is a sin even though it is not explicitly articulated as such in The Bible and is even considered legal in the United States. We judge an abortion a sin based upon the clear biblical principle that only God, the sole author of all life, reserves the right to take life and that He has considered the unborn to be persons in His sight from the time of conception (See Psalm 51:5; 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5). We add to this the fact that the taking of an innocent life is murder definitely prohibited by God in the 5th Commandment, “*You shall not murder.”*

The same type of extrapolation from clear teachings of Holy Scripture could justifiably be utilized to judge not wearing a facemask as a sin under those circumstances where legitimate government has expressly mandated the wearing of a facemask. After all, we do have the apostolic admonition to “*submit to the governing authorities”* for they are “*established by God”* as His *“servants” (Romans 13).*  We, therefore, owe our rulers our obedience and honor. We as Lutherans also understand that God includes the governing authorities in His explicit command to “Honor your Father and Mother.” *“We should fear and love God so that we do not despise our parents or other authorities but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.” (Small Catechism).*

When it comes to facemask mandates, however, there are some other considerations that murky the waters. Our governing authorities are not in agreement on this issue and are not speaking with one voice. The Federal Government, the highest authority in our land, although it has at times and in ways encouraged the use of facemasks, has also openly questioned the effectiveness of such masks to inhibit the spread of the Covid virus. The Surgeon General himself, along with various, prestigious, medical professionals and respected virologists, have stated emphatically that the majority of cloth facemasks being used, whether manufactured or homemade, are totally ineffective in stopping the spread of the coronavirus. They have also warned that the consistent and long term wearing of facemasks is actually unhealthy for the wearer as the facemask traps carbon dioxide, as well as other viruses already present in the body, and blocks the breathing of fresh air inhibiting a person’s cognitive ability and even under some circumstances causing the person to lose consciousness.

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Adding to the confusion and uncertainty, the federal governing authority, i.e. the president, has allowed the state governors to establish their guidelines and means for dealing with this pandemic. This has led to highly politicized policy making and many arbitrary and capricious mandates. This is clearly evident in that where the governors are Democrats their mandates and guidelines have become quite draconian, whereas Republican governors have adopted much more relaxed rules and guidelines for their respective citizens. With such inconsistencies among our governing authorities how can any one of us conclude that not wearing a mask is loveless and a sin?

Secondly, consider that loving the neighbor also means not putting stumbling blocks in the path of someone else’s faith in Christ by making requirements, conditions, or judgments where God has not. Speaking of the freedom we have in Christ, the apostle of the Lord states, “*As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions…. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God… but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother… let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:1, 10-21).*

One more thing, loving my neighbor is much more than obeying a single mandate. If I judge others as not being Christian because I don’t see them wearing a facemask in public, I have just reduced the Lord’s command to love others as God has loved us in Christ to the obeying of one manmade law. Aren’t there other ways of loving and caring for our neighbors? Besides, what if my insistence that people wear facemasks actually causes people with underlying health conditions to get sick or even die? Is that loving them? What if forcing people who must work in the public to wear a mask for 8 hours or more a day does short term or long term injury to their own respiratory systems? Is that loving them? You and I might observe people not wearing facemasks but we are not always there to see the many other things they might actually be doing for their neighbors. They could be nurses caring for the very lives of people all day long. They could be taking care of the needs of their families or their neighbors or even the homeless. They could be ministering every day to the spiritual or emotional needs of other people. Are such people not loving their neighbors? Think of this also: if wearing a mask to prevent the spread of Covid is loving our neighbor, then even after the Covid pandemic has passed, we ought to continue wearing facemasks while in public for the rest of our lives. After all, tens of thousands of people die every year from the flu and influenza which are also airborne viruses. Why haven’t our governing authorities insisted on masking up to prevent their spread? Our loving should not stop with one pandemic!

Here is the bottom line. A fundamental truth of Biblical teaching is that one does not make himself a Christian by doing a certain work or works. A Christian is *born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).* Becoming a Christian, *born again,* is completely God’s gracious work. We do not add to or detract from the status of being a Child of God, a Christian, by keeping one law or another no matter who commands it. We read in Galatians, **“…*we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ…”*** *(2:16).*

Jesus has said, **“*Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone…”*** (John 8:7). I guarantee you that not one of us is a paragon of virtue when it comes to truly loving our neighbor as our self. None of us are truly and fully keeping all of the LORD’s explicit commandments let alone every mandate of civil authority. **“*For (we) all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”*** *(Romans 3:23,24).*Life during this pandemic is trying enough without you and me fueling animosity and division among us by judging one another’s motives or declaring who is being Christian or not. Our God of the cross is certainly capable of sorting all this out for Himself! As children of His grace it behooves us to also be gracious to one another.

The peace, joy and mercy of our Redeeming Lord be with you all, masked or unmasked!

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