

Good Monday Morning, on this rather brisk "wintery" day ... at least it is that here in Northern Indiana! I trust your week has been blessed by the Lord in many ways. We live in these days of adhering to the mandates related to COVID 19. How are we to handle this? I trust the following will give you some guidelines.

HANDLING A MANDATE

A Devotional prepared by Dr. Robert L. Morris

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"Wisdom resides in the heart of the discerning.

"Proverbs 14:33a; HCSB

Recently I received in an email from a dear and close friend, fellow-pastor for many years, and for several years the distinguished General Superintendent of The Evangelical Church, in which my ministerial credentials reside and in which denomination I pastored for 24 years, and was a Conference (District) Superintendent for 8 years. That email was in the form of a Devotional. I was blessed by the presentation prepared by Dr. John Sills, and also challenged to think more seriously about the world-wide pandemic through which we are all attempting to live with some sense of normalcy. In the first paragraph below, the term "De-Mask-Us Road" is from Dr. Sills! I love it! From the inspiration I received from his Devotional, I developed the following Devotional. I trust it will be of help to many who read my Devotional posts, and that you will gain both information and inspiration.

Today, you and I are living in a situation different from any we have ever encountered. The COVID 19 issue with the mandates control part of our lives. We are living under the present controversial "masks versus no masks" struggle. We face it daily in the Senior Facility in which I live. There are those who despise the requirement of wearing a mask in all common areas. Words of criticism flow far too frequently, staining the otherwise sharing times of some of the people who have developed friendships here.

"I'm going to wear a mask during this pandemic!" "Not me! I'm not going to wear a mask during this pandemic!" "I have my rights and no one is going to tell me what to do!" So go the statements. Unfortunately, I hear such negative statements even among professing Christian people. My response to this is simple. "Someone ... be it government ... federal, state, local, business, or facility ... yes, they can if it is in the best interest of your health, and that of your family, your neighbors, your associates, your friends, or your co-workers. As Christians we have no moral right to live in a manner that is detrimental to the well-being and health of others.

Here is a reference from Biblical history (The Book of Acts) I have borrowed from my dear brother in the ministry. "Strange as it seems, too many of those who feel they are walking with Paul down the 'De-Mask-Us Road' too much of the time show very little respect for those who for whatever reasons feel more comfortable in public, including church, wearing masks." (John F. Sills, PhD) I share that with you, because we all face the issue of the mandate to wear masks in public gatherings. These mandates come from our federal and/or state governments. At other times, even when an official mandate is lifted, we may encounter situations in which those in control over where we find ourselves continue the mandate. This is true especially in a facility dealing with health issues. Yet, there remains a serious difference of opinion that is like a plague on the people, and possibly to an even greater degree than the medical problem of Covid 19 that still exists. I am sure it is generally uncomfortable, but it is there, nonetheless. Now, how do we handle it? How do we live with such a mandate? Let's look into the Word of God.

The Prophet Jeremiah included an important comment about this kind of a situation. "About Edom, this is what the LORD of Hosts says: 'Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has our wisdom disappeared? Has it rotted away? Are we void of wise counsel?' (Jeremiah 49:7; HCSB) Another translation puts it this way: "Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom decayed?" (TNIV) The historic context for this statement from Jeremiah is easily discovered in Scripture. The Israelites were dealing with the Edomites. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, who was the firstborn son of Isaac and the twin brother of Jacob. While still in the womb, Esau and Jacob struggled together. (See Genesis 25:22) Rebekah, their mother,

approached God for an answer to the question “why?” God responded to Rebekah, noting that they would become two nations. Further, He declared that the older one would serve the younger. (Genesis 25:23) As an adult, Esau foolishly sold his inheritance to Jacob. The Scripture states it this way: “Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, exhausted. He said to Jacob, ‘Let me eat some of that red stuff, because I am exhausted.’ ... Jacob replied, ‘First sell me your birthright.’ ‘Look,’ said Esau, ‘I’m about to die, so what good is a birthright to me?’” Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first.’ So he swore to Jacob and sold his birthright to him. Then Jacob gave bread and lentil stew to Esau; he ate, drank, got up, and went away. So Esau despised his birthright.” (Genesis 25:29-30a; 31-33; HCSB) And that began an unending conflict between the descendants of Esau and the descendants of Jacob. The two nations continued to struggle through most of their history ... a struggle I believe is still raging in the world. This is a major “take-off” point for what I want to share with you. This is my question to the people of God. Hear it clearly: “Has our wisdom disappeared? Has it rotted away? Are we void of wise counsel?”

King Solomon wrote: “Keep sound wisdom and discretion.” (Proverbs 3:21; NKJV) On the “other side of the coin,” we hear King Solomon, the wisest man in history except for Jesus, saying: “Fools die for lack of wisdom,” and “A man of understanding has wisdom.” (Proverbs 10:21b; 23b; NKJV) King Solomon also wrote: “He who is devoid of wisdom despises his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his peace.” (Proverbs 11:12; NKJV)

The Lord Jesus stated clearly as recorded by the Beloved Disciple John: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also 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; HCSB) This same Disciple John also wrote: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18a; NKJV)

It seems to me to be a point of wisdom to say that we need to combine the instructions of King Solomon with Jesus’ words in John 13:34, 35, and with His instruction through the same Disciple John found in 1 John 4:18a. Also, we need to understand that only the Holy Spirit can enable us to join together these admonitions of Scripture. This is a part of what I meant by “the whole counsel of God” in reference to the theme of this Devotional.

I want to suggest three instructional keys to “a life that makes a difference.”

1. Exercise wisdom. We recall here that King Solomon wrote: “Keep sound wisdom and discretion.” (Proverbs 3:21; NKJV) The Hebrew word translated by our English word “wisdom” is חָכְמָה - ḥākemah. As a verb it is used at least 26 times in the Old Testament, and is rightly understood as “making wise,” or sometimes “teaching.” As a noun, in various forms and translated in its contexts, the word is used at least 312 times in the Hebrew text. Often this word is translated by the words “understanding” and “knowledge.” These are not higher levels than “wisdom,” but are simply poetic synonyms that are used for emphasis. It is absolutely necessary for all followers of Jesus to remember that “wisdom” is a gift from God. He Who is holy, righteous, and just is the source of all wisdom. King Solomon wrote: “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding the heavens; by His knowledge the depths were broken up, and clouds drop down the dew.” (Proverbs 3:19, 20; NKJV) Solomon also wrote: “The LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up success for the upright; He is a shield to those who live with integrity so that He may guard the paths of justice, and protect the way of His loyal followers.” (Proverbs 2:6-8; HCSB) The super-important “key” follows immediately: “Then you will understand righteousness, justice, and integrity - every good path.” (Proverbs 2:9; HCSB) The life-directing result will be as Solomon states: “For wisdom will enter your mind, and knowledge will delight your heart. Discretion will watch over you, and understanding will guard you, rescuing you from the way of evil.” (Proverbs 2:11, 12a; HCSB) You will now want to read Proverbs 2:12b-22, and observe how King Solomon lays before us the “wisdom-leading” life style set before us by the LORD who is holy, righteous, and just. Here is the wisdom of God that characterizes our lives in every part of life. Now we come to the second key instruction that makes a difference:

2. Extend love. Recall Jesus’ words: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also 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; HCSB) Here is the well-known Greek word ἀγάπη - “agape,” pronounced “ah -

gah – pay.” It is the word that most accurately declares the true nature of God Himself. He IS love. In the Old Testament we find the equally vibrant word חֶסֶד – hesed – “chesed” pronounced like “khes – ed.” This is one of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew Old Testament. Some of the English words used to translate חֶסֶד – hesed are “mercy,” “kindness,” “lovingkindness,” “love,” “steadfast love,” “loyalty,” “unfailing love.” Look at these beautiful words from the Book of Proverbs. Each uses the word חֶסֶד and is translated variously by “mercy,” “loyalty,” “lovingkindness,” or “steadfast love,” depending on the translation used. These verses “preach the need for and result of love extended.”

“Wickedness is atoned for by loyalty and faithfulness.” (Proverbs 16:6; HCSB).

“Don’t those who plot evil go astray? But those who plan good find love and faithfulness.” (Proverbs 14:22; TNIV)

“Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the LORD evil is avoided.” (Proverbs 16:6; TNIV)

“Love and faithfulness keep a king safe; through love his throne is made secure.” (Proverbs 20:28; TNIV)

“Whoever pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor.” (Proverbs 21:21)

“Hatred stirs up conflicts, but love covers all offenses.” (Proverbs 10:12; HCSB)

There is a third instructional key to handling mandates such as the COVID 19 issue as well as others.

3. Embrace fellow-believers in a proper and appropriate manner. This includes those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. The first is easy; the second sometimes difficult!

The word “embrace” is easily misinterpreted. It is frequently thought of as clasping hold of someone or hugging someone as an act of affection. That would be defining the word as a reciprocal verb. This definition need not carry any wrong interpretations. A gentle hug may be in good taste if done appropriately. However, even at that, I wish to use an equally accepted interpretation, noting that “embrace” is also a transitive verb. Its several synonyms include “accept,” “support,” “receive,” “welcome,” “include,” or “involve.” Such definitions do NOT require nor even ask for any physical act such as hugging, or even a hand-shake. “Embracing,” as a transitive verb, can involve any of the synonyms listed above.

It is the heart of what Jesus meant when He spoke of ἀγάπη – “agape”: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-38; HCSB) No mention of any kind of physical embrace, but everything about a “spiritual embracing of God and of others!” This kind of “embracing” does not require a physical act nor mental agreement. It DOES require an acceptance of others, and a welcome to those who are fellow-believers in the family of God. That will become the evidence of what Solomon meant by “love covers all offenses.” (Proverbs 10:12) It is expressed strongly in the words of James: “My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, he should know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death and cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20; HCSB)

In 1909 Ira B. Wilson wrote the lyrics for what has become a beloved hymn in the Church. In 1924 George S. Shuler composed the music for those dynamic words. Join in singing it from your heart.

MAKE ME A BLESSING

1. Out in the highways and byways of life, many are weary and sad.
Carry the sunshine where darkness is rife, making the sorrowing glad.

CHORUS (after each verse)

Make me a blessing; make me a blessing. Out of my life may Jesus shine.
Make me a blessing, O Savior, I pray. Make me a blessing to someone today.

2. Tell the sweet story of Christ and His love; tell of His pow’r to forgive.
Others will trust Him if only you prove true ev’ry moment you live.

3. Give as 'twas given to you in your need; love as the Master loved you.
Be to the helpless a helper indeed; unto your mission be true.