

# Love Your Neighbor in the Coronavirus Pandemic

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I'm confident that all of you know that, as the born-again children of God, we're to display the love of God to our brethren, to our neighbors, and even to our enemies. Love should be the hallmark of our lives. That's beyond question. I don't need to list the myriad Bible passages that tell us this. But what is questionable is this: During this coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic—circumstances that most of us have never before encountered—how can we best show love to others? When things change so radically and so quickly, there may be things that we've been doing all along that may now be blunders; they may even be harmful. And there may be ways to show love that we wouldn't normally think of.

## **The Present Distress**

As I write, the disease being called COVID-19 (caused by the virus called SARS-CoV-2) continues to spread through communities around the world. Here in the United States, the fact that we are still in the early stages of its spread, coupled with the only mild symptoms that it causes in some people and the lack of testing up to this point, have caused some to be complacent and scoff at the warnings, recommendations, and measures being taken by officials. But is this wise? Is this loving?

The reality is that we don't know what will yet happen in this pandemic. We can see the different outcomes in countries that responded slowly and incompletely and those countries that reacted quickly. Simply because we don't know how bad it will be doesn't mean that we should continue with life as normal. It means we must take the most cautious approach. We should do this, not because of fear, but because it is the most loving approach to take for the sake of others. When circumstances change, we must change the way we live our lives. But our motives and our core values must never change.

The Bible never teaches us to stop loving when circumstances change. In fact, it says, "Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:8). On the other hand, the Bible does give us a precedent for changing our actions according to the circumstances.

We would probably all agree that marriage is a good thing. Genesis 2:18 tells us that God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper comparable to him." And verse 24 says, "Therefore a man will leave

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his father and his mother, and will join with his wife, and they will be one flesh." And yet, writing in a time of intense persecution of Christians, Paul wrote, "Therefore I think that because of the distress that is on us, that it's good for a man to remain as he is" (1 Corinthians 7:26). That is, for a man who was single, Paul's counsel was that it would be best if the man remained unmarried.

Did this mean that marriage was no longer good? No. It meant that, under the circumstances of the extreme persecution at that time, marriage was probably not the wisest course of action.

We now very suddenly find ourselves in another time of distress. Our distress is a disease that has spread across the continents and which has the potential to kill millions of people. Does this mean that some things, which we might normally think are good, should not be done? I think so, and I believe that the way to determine what should and what should not be done is the overriding principle of love. Under these circumstances, what is showing love and what is not?

### **To Meet or Not to Meet**

Whether Christians should continue attending church is one of the biggest questions that Christians are asking. Elders wonder whether they should cancel meetings. And, if they decide not to cancel, people wonder whether they should go. This can seem like quite a dilemma. But I believe we can sort it out when we bear in mind the overriding principle of love.

You see, you may be willing to risk getting sick in order to continue to attend. But the question isn't about you. It's about others. At this moment, if officials are right, we in the United States, and people in many other countries, are like people standing ankle deep in calm waters on the beach. What we don't see is that just beyond the horizon is a tsunami heading right for us. The bad news is that, if the experts are right, this tsunami will hit us. Also, there is nothing we can do at this time to lessen the volume of water in this wave. But the good news is that there is something we can do to lower the height of the wave and spread its volume out over a greater distance so that it doesn't overwhelm us. That "something" is social distancing, washing hands, etc. All the things you see every day on the news.

This article, with its simulations, does an excellent job in explaining why we must practice social distancing: "Why Outbreaks Like Coronavirus Spread Exponentially, and How to Flatten the Curve"

([https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/corona-simulator/?fbclid=IwAR3aZgsdLcwqloS0RM18aF\\_cB4wLJsp7V6kCd\\_fuebVgfl7DN8SHLu6c6f0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/corona-simulator/?fbclid=IwAR3aZgsdLcwqloS0RM18aF_cB4wLJsp7V6kCd_fuebVgfl7DN8SHLu6c6f0)). And here's

another article that tells why the COVID-19 pandemic is much more serious than the seasonal flu: “Why Covid-19 is worse than the flu, in one chart” (<https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/3/18/21184992/coronavirus-covid-19-flu-comparison-chart>).

These articles, and many more resources online, tell us that if we start out in a community with an equal number of people with the flu and with COVID-19, we will, over time, wind up with many more people with COVID-19 than with the flu, many more hospitalizations with COVID-19, and many more deaths. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that up to 42.9 million people in the U.S. came down with the flu during the 2018-2019 flu season. Of those, 647,000 needed a hospital stay. Sadly, 61,200 people died.

Using the stats we now have, if that same number of people got COVID-19, then 8,151,000 would require hospitalization and between 429,000 and 1,458,600 would die! That should stagger us. But don’t forget. COVID-19 is actually much more contagious than the flu. If we continue to behave with it as we do the flu—carrying on our lives as normal—we will have many more than 42.9 million people sick with it. Thus, we must not behave as we normally do. We must practice social distancing.

Knowing these things, brethren, what is the loving thing for Christians to do? What do we, in particular, have control over that can help to lower the spread of this virus? We can stop meeting.

#### **Objections to not meeting answered:**

*But doesn’t Hebrews 10:25 say that we are not to stop attending church?* Well, no, actually (see “After more than twenty years, I’m admitting the truth: Hebrews 10:25: What Are We Not To Forsake?”) ([https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/hebrews\\_1025/](https://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/hebrews_1025/)). But, even if it did say that, would it apply to not assembling for the sake of controlling the spread of a pandemic? Would the apostles have ordered people to continue to meet if they knew it would spread a disease, not only amongst the brethren, but into the entire community? No, that would be a sort of legalism, not love. Paul wrote, “Above all these things, walk in love, which is the bond of perfection” (Colossians 3:14).

*But Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the middle of them” (Matthew 18:20).* Jesus said this in the context of making decisions in the *ekklēsia*. That is, a quorum is as little as two people because Jesus guides the decision. Jesus was not suggesting that He is not with us when we are alone.

*Christians had the faith to assemble in the face of persecution, and I'm not afraid either.* Having faith and not fear is the proper response given to us by the Holy Spirit. But this isn't about having faith and not being afraid. It's about social distancing to save others from suffering and death. It is about showing love to others. Those others may not even be believers, but we can show love to them by staying apart.

Remember, people can have and be spreading COVID-19 for up to fourteen days before they show symptoms, and some have little to no symptoms ever. But when they go to church, they can still be giving the virus to Brianna, who will give it to Mark, who will pass it on to Gramma Webber when he helps her to her seat. And Gramma Webber will die. And, by the way, Mark will also pass it on to his non-Christian daughter-in-law, who will pass it on to her brother-in-law who is immuno-compromised because of a kidney transplant. And, he'll die, too. Do you see what I mean? Don't think it can happen? "The face of coronavirus: Grandmother of 4 dies days after likely contracting virus at church."

(<https://www.wsbtv.com/news/georgia/face-coronavirus-grandmother-4-dies-days-after-contracting-virus-church/WHYT4XC3EJB4PPEP3B5FD37VAU/?fbclid=IwAR0xU5EvZJ5egFm6DjtcN7SsHM4OfA390tc0KeLS1gQ6gzTG-ZCTzXroncM>)

*But you're just fear-mongering!* Am I? The numbers I'm reading say I'm not. Of course, maybe they're wrong. I pray they are. But do I have a right to take that chance with other people's lives? No! As a Christian, I must not. I must, if anything, err on the side of caution for the sake of love.

I think it would be good to recall that, while we may not for a time be able to physically meet, we believers are always the *ekklesia*, Christ's assembly called out of the world that is always assembled before God.

But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable multitudes of angels, to the festal gathering and assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better than that of Abel.

Hebrews 12:22-24

## **Show Love from a Distance**

Don't hoard. We've all seen the shelves. They're empty, but not because manufacturing has stopped. They're empty because people are buying way more than they really need. This screams, "Me first!" But the Bible tells us to be, "doing nothing through rivalry or through conceit, but in humility, each counting others better than himself; each of you not just looking to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). This is a demonstration of love. In other words, seeing that others have what they need is our business.

Are you young and healthy? Do you know people who are sixty plus or who have health problems that make them candidates for complications from COVID-19? Not all communities have stores that deliver groceries. So, give these people a call and offer to grocery shop for them, pick up medicines, or run any other errands. Take a phone order, then leave the items at their door. Work out a way to be reimbursed without direct contact.

Wash your hands. I know. By now, we've all seen how important it is to thoroughly wash our hands. Yet, I continue to see men come out of public restroom stalls and walk out the door without washing their hands. I don't get it. Is this supposed to be manly? This is an inconsiderate, disease-spreading practice in the best of times. In a pandemic, it's contemptible. Show love to your neighbor: thoroughly wash your hands several times a day.

Show you care from a distance. Earlier, we saw that we shouldn't meet. But, in this technological age, there are plenty of ways to stay in touch, from doing church online to texting, chatting, video calling, and just plain making a phone call.

## **Obey the Authorities**

By telling people to stay home, by ordering gathering places—including churches—to close, by telling people to wash their hands, are the civil authorities commanding us to sin and disobey God? No. They know that doing these things will help to flatten the curve of the exponential growth of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will help hospitals and other medical facilities care for the sick without being inundated with more people than they can care for. Thus, we should show love to our communities by obeying Romans 13 and doing what the government leaders say.

"Hope for the best and prepare for the worst." It's a wise old saying. Only God knows how this pandemic will play out. Personally, I think that as we do more testing, we'll find that the death rate is lower than the original estimates and

that more people have had the virus with little to no symptoms than we presently realize. But that's just my opinion. In the meantime, I'm going to obey the authorities because their directions appear to be the best way to act in love toward others.

### **Pray**

Praying doesn't require social contact, yet, "The insistent prayer of a righteous person is powerfully effective" (James 5:16b). Without going anywhere, you can, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

In nothing be anxious, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7