

24 July 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The ongoing COVID-19 epidemic has caused serious disruptions to the lifestyles that we enjoy as Americans and as believers living in America. The response of Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and the Ohio Department of Health has sought to prevent the spread of the virus, while also maintaining the freedoms guaranteed to Ohioans by our federal government.

This week Governor DeWine issued a mandate that masks should be worn under the following circumstances:

- At an indoor location that is not a residence
- Outdoors, with less than six-feet of social distance from people who are not household members
- Waiting for, riding, driving, or operating public transportation, such as a taxi, a car service, or a private car used for ride-sharing

The order only requires those 10 years old or older to wear a mask. Additional exclusions include:

- Those with a medical condition or disability or those communicating with someone with a disability;
- Those who are actively exercising or playing sports;
- Those who are officiants at religious services;
- Those who are actively involved in public safety; or
- Those who are actively eating or drinking.¹

As elders, our responsibility is not to weigh in on a medical or scientific debate about the effectiveness of mask-wearing; rather, our responsibility is to determine whether we as believers have a responsibility to obey the government mandate to wear masks. At our weekly meeting on July 23, the elders unanimously agreed that Romans 13:1-3 and 2 Peter 2:13-17 provide a theological foundation for us to act at the present time.

Allow us to quote these passages:

¹ <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/resources/news-releases-news-you-can-use/gov-dewine-issues-statewide-mask-order-travel-warning>

Romans 13:1–3 (NASB95)

- 1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.
- 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.
- 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;

1 Peter 2:13–17 (NASB95)

- 13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,
- 14 or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.
- 15 For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.
- 16 *Act* as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but *use it* as bondslaves of God.
- 17 Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

We recognize that wearing a mask is inconvenient and uncomfortable, yet we do not believe that it will prevent us from worshipping our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Therefore, we request that everyone who attends the Chapel for Sunday or Wednesday worship wear a mask in accordance with the Governor's guidelines quoted above. We also request that if someone chooses not to wear a mask for one of the reasons found in the Governor's orders, that that individual remain six feet away from others.

Note that the orders exempt "officiants at religious services" from wearing a mask. The Governor himself was careful in how he answered questions defining an "officiant", giving freedom to various faith traditions to define it in a way they deemed reasonable. Here is how we are defining "officiant":

- The worship leader who is directing the congregation in worship (at the podium).
- The singers who assist the worship leader (while on the platform, 6' apart from one another).
- Anyone who prays publicly (while at the podium).
- Anyone who reads Scripture (while at the podium).
- The pastor who preaches to the congregation (while at the podium).
- Teachers, toddler care, and nursery care workers can determine for themselves if they desire to mask or not, while performing their ministry in the designated areas.

Dear friends, these are trying times and our enemy, Satan, would like to see our church and our elders divided. Mask-wearing is certainly controversial, yet, if that is all that is required of Jesus'

church for gathering, why is it too much? A good parallel in the Bible is the story of Naaman the Assyrian, who went to the prophet Elijah to be cured of leprosy:

“So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean.” But Naaman was furious and went away and said, “Behold, I thought, ‘He will surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place and cure the leper.’ “Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” So he turned and went away in a rage. Then his servants came near and spoke to him and said, “My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean.” 2 Kings 5:9-14

There may come a day when we must violate the mandates of governing officials because those mandates contradict the Word of God. We are ready to do so, to be jailed or even die to preserve the true doctrines of the faith. Yet, dear friends, this is not that time and we would be a good example to our community, to our governor, and to one another if we comply with the mask mandate in its present form.

Serving Christ Together,

The Elders of the Grace Brethren Chapel

Elders:

Dave Damschroder

Jonathan Edwards

John Fahrback

Keith Merriman