



# BIBLEWAY MINISTRIES

MAKING A DIFFERENCE—THE BIBLE WAY



## Loving Our Neighbors in a COVID World

**M**asks, vaccines, government mandates, inconveniences — and by the way, what about my rights? Could the regulations and restraints be a conspiracy to slowly decrease our rights as Big Government takes over? Pandemic restrictions have created conflicts and division among Americans and added to the already heightened drama of our politics. As for me, I don't like the masks because not only are they uncomfortable, they also fog my glasses. While thinking of my own inconvenience, how easy it is to forget about immunocompromised neighbors and friends, and other folks who have lost their jobs due to the economic turmoil stemming from the pandemic restrictions.

As of January 22, 2022, there were [907,190 who had died in our country from COVID-19](#) since the onset of the pandemic. At the same time, there had been 5,681,386 COVID-related deaths in the world.

### The Great Debate

The pandemic has sparked many philosophical questions such as, How much concern should I have for others? What difference will that concern make? If you don't believe in wearing masks and getting vaccinated, then why isn't it good enough for you that I wear my mask and I've been vaccinated? Doesn't this protect you from me and protect me from you? Doesn't that make it okay for me to do my own thing?

We can go back and forth on these issues, and the divide and debate will continue. You certainly have a right to your opinion. You have a right to disagree with my opinion, as I have a right to disagree with yours.

### God's COVID Mandate

The Bible doesn't tell us if we should wear masks or take vaccines, but it does tell us how we should treat our neighbors. On this topic, God gives us His own mandate: We are to love them. Put simply, I am to love you, my neighbor, as I love myself (Matthew 22:39). Regardless of our differences, I should love you no matter what.

Because I love myself, the way I treat myself can be summed up in two words: respect and care. Loving myself allows me the fortitude to see my value, even with all my faults and shortcomings. I can still accept myself, warts and all.

Now apply the way we love ourselves to the way we

treat our neighbors. Can you imagine not necessarily agreeing with another person but accepting the fact that they have value? That is precisely what God does. No matter how bad our sin may be, God sees us as loved ones. He hates the sin, yet still loves the sinner. We sometimes give others the impression that we hate sin, and don't care a great deal for the sinner.

### Common Love

Loving others with the love of God is the ability to respect them, even when we cannot condone their lifestyle, actions or opinions. Jesus had the ability to leave individuals with a sense that He genuinely cared about them, even when He disagreed with them. He could see past their physical condition to their spiritual needs. He calls His followers to do the same.

Perhaps we will never agree on the usefulness of masks, the ethics of vaccination mandates or the way COVID-19 was handled by our government leaders. But we can respect each other enough to agree to disagree. We can love one another with the love of Christ.

I can think of many instances where, even in the Body of Christ, we have discounted each other because we disagree on certain things. Sometimes when we talk to each other, a barrier still exists between us because our disagreements have resulted in hurt feelings. Christ, challenges us to have an even deeper foundation for our relationships. Our shared faith in Christ is a tie that binds us even stronger than mutual agreement on the pandemic.

For Christians, the most important issue is not COVID-19 protocols, mask or vaccination mandates, or the degree of government control we are willing to tolerate. The stakes are much higher. Our testimony before the world is on full display in the way we treat each other, for better or worse.

### Uncommon Love

No one will argue with common, tangible demonstrations of love – a helping hand and an act of kindness are always welcome. But there is another side to loving our neighbor which is not as common, or as easy to practice, especially when we are so far apart politically and socially.

In his [virtual keynote address](#) at the [British Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast](#) in June . . . *(continued next page)*

2020, Bishop Tomlin of Kensington said, "In our society, we make a great deal of personal autonomy, the rights of the individual to choose our own way of life. . . . When the lockdown was announced . . . we moved very quickly to a very different way of life. We all chose to curb our own rights, our individual freedom . . . to serve instead the common good, to care for our neighbors....

"We learned that for a society to function well and to ward off the threats that confront it, individual choice on its own is not enough. A society cannot survive the threats that might undermine it if each one of us pursues our own self-chosen goals independent of everyone else. We have to learn to sacrifice our own desires for the sake of the wider community."

True love selflessly seeks the other person's best interests rather than our own. It thinks about how my presence in a crowd of people will affect my family if someone in the crowd happens to have COVID-19 and I catch the virus from them. It considers how my decision to wear or not wear a mask in public will affect someone who is immunocompromised or part of a group which is susceptible to the virus. It weighs the impact of my personal vaccination decision against the cost to my children and spouse if I get sick. This isn't about making restrictive rules, but about putting others' needs before my own. Love picks up where legislation leaves off. Again, this love is not common, but we can make it so.

### Won't You Be Their Neighbor?

In Philippians 2:3-5, a man who knew the law well enough to assert his rights and legal opinion at will counseled, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."

Here's another philosophical question which is often used to justify the assertion of our rights: "If I'm not hurting anyone else by my actions, then what's wrong with them?" In the parable of The Good Samaritan, Jesus spotlighted three men who encountered another man in need. None of them was responsible for his needy condition. None of them was obligated to lift a finger to help him. But one man made an effort to improve his condition. He took no thought for himself, but put the other man's needs above his own. That is a true neighbor.

Our world with COVID-19 is filled with many people in need. Some are lonely and isolated. Some are tired and ready to give up. Others are depressed and fearful because of the ongoing cycle of bad news. Many have lost loved ones to the ravaging virus. These people don't need our opinions. They need a true neighbor.

They need to see how our faith in Jesus can cause us to lay aside our rights, privileges and preferences for the good of others. They need to see our care extends beyond our mirrors to those hurting outside our windows and doors. In a few words, they need to see grace and love.

### Letting Go of Our Rights Is Right

As Christians we worship Jesus, who had every right that exists. But we don't worship Jesus because of the way He exercised His rights. We worship Him because He is God, yet He chose to relinquish His rights to serve us and die for our sins. If we want to live out this faith in our world, instead of asking how our actions relate to our rights, let us ask how the exercise of our rights will affect our neighbors – their health and safety, and their loved ones.

Can we pull it off? I'm encouraged to say, yes, we can. At the 2020 prayer breakfast referenced earlier, British leaders praised churches for the good they had done in their communities during the pandemic and government-mandated lockdowns. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said of The Church, "It's been absolutely inspiring to see churches respond to the lockdown as they have with true Christian values. They've reminded us all of their role as pillars of their communities, reaching out to bring hope, peace and practical care to

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those in need. Thank you, thank you so much for that."

Another British politician praised a church in his neighborhood which had shared food, provided assistance to nearby schools and hospitals, and offered friendship to many in the community who had been forced into solitude by lockdown measures. "I know this is being replicated by churches and faith groups across the whole country," he said. "We come together today to celebrate the difference faith makes and to thank you for what you're doing to bring hope and good news."

The pandemic will come to an end, but more than likely the conflict and divisiveness we see in our world will continue – unless we change our current course. We can begin to end the rift and bridge the great divide through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When our sins separated us from God, justice (fairness in light of our rights) demanded our death. Instead, God sent His perfect Son to the cross to take the lethal injection we deserved. His death was the vaccine for our sinful condition. Three days later, He arose from the dead declaring all power was in His hands. That's good news, because through Him we can have power to love others who, like us, have noticeable imperfections. Jesus' self-denial brought even greater glory. May we follow in His steps. - Dr. L.W. Edwards and Cam Edwards

