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May 2020 “ARE YOU AN EXAMPLE?”

Dear Friends,

I began writing this letter on April 23. Therefore, the information contained is as recent and accurate as I have been able to confirm. By now, you are aware of the world-wide Covid-19 epidemic. This virus has impacted some nations at a greater measure than others; exact statistics are difficult to verify, but as of April 22, at least 175 of the 195 nations in the world have reported Covid-19 cases. Along with the spread of this virus has been the rampant spread of false information, conspiracy theories, and unmitigated ignorance. Sadly, many Christians have vigorously helped propagate unfounded and unsubstantiated internet foolishness.

Over and over I have read the diatribes of people proclaiming how the United States government has “stolen” the rights of people through the business closures, quarantining and mass gathering limitation advisories. What these people do not understand is that the government has not stolen anything; it has simply exercised the authority it has had all along. Furthermore, if these “experts” in tyranny and stolen freedom would spend time doing genuine research, they would discover that nations all over the globe have implemented similar travel restrictions, business shutdowns, mass gathering limitations, and more. In other words, it’s not just the United States that is going through a very challenging time.

The temporary restrictions imposed on us are for our protection; governments are trying to stop the spread of this deadly contagion. It is not dissimilar to “stay-at-home” orders given during a snow blizzard; people are told to stay at home for their safety; violating that order could result in arrest. The consequences of such an order are temporary travel restrictions, canceled flights, business closures and more. Where is all the righteous indignation about stolen freedom during such restrictions? The difference is that people can look out their window and see the blizzard and rapidly accumulating treacherous ice and snow, therefore agreeing that it is safer to stay at home. But they cannot see a virus, thus ignorantly believing they are safe.

The following was posted a few days ago on Facebook by someone who openly professes Jesus Christ as Savior (words, spelling and punctuation have not been changed):

“We should be free to do as we wish. I’m not a prisoner. Let those who are willing and healthy do as they wish. Its not right to create laws that violate my rights as a human and a US citizen. So many people died so that we could have the rights listed in the constitution. What about those lives? Don’t they matter too? Those who are susceptible to death via covid19, stay home. Thats fine. But those who want to to live like a free American, should not be put in jail or fined for doing so.”

Where do I begin? This person obviously does not realize that EVERYONE is susceptible to death via Covid-19, some more than others due to high-risk physical conditions. One thing I feel safe in guaranteeing is that every, single person who has contracted Covid-19 wonders if they would have been better off staying home. Furthermore, what do you believe the families of those who have died from Covid-19 are thinking?

Governments have imposed restrictions and released advisories because, quite frankly, too many people left to themselves, are ignorant, foolish, greedy or a combination of the three. Telling people to use their own judgment is like hanging a “Wet Paint” sign on a freshly painted bench and believing no one will touch it. When restrictions were issued that non-essential businesses were to close, tattoo parlors and stores selling “adult” products stayed open, defiantly claiming they were essential to their communities (after further warnings, they were forced to close). You simply cannot trust people to use common sense and wisdom when they lack both.

Along with this, Christians throughout have raised their voices in great protest over the mass gathering limitation advisories being imposed on churches. “Our religious freedoms are being violated,” they claim. But is that true? No one has been told to burn their Bible, no one has been told they can’t preach the Gospel, and churches have been highly encouraged to continue streaming their services over the internet (albeit, with ten or less in actual attendance). Moreover, it has been repeatedly emphasized that these advisories are only **TEMPORARY** until Covid-19 is shut down. In spite of this, many pastors and churches have taken a stand of what can justifiably be described as rebellion to authority by refusing to limit congregational attendance. Here is but a very small sampling of what has happened (NOTE: Over a month ago I publicly shared that churches which openly defy mass-gathering advisories may see members contract Covid-19, and that some may even die. I also said it would be quite ironic if churches ignored the advisories, conducted regular services on Easter Sunday to celebrate resurrection life, only to have people in the congregation contract Covid-19 and die):

In the state of Washington, a church allowed a choir practice. Out of the 60 in attendance, 45 have been diagnosed with Covid-19, three have been hospitalized and two have died.

A pastor of a church in Virginia stood before a fully-attended Sunday service and said, “I firmly believe God is larger than this dreaded virus. You can quote me on that.” He vowed to keep his church open “unless I’m in jail or the hospital.” A few days after that service, he was diagnosed with Covid-19, dying one week later. His wife and three other family members have also been diagnosed with the virus. It is currently unknown how many more of the church’s members have contracted the disease. The pastor’s daughter is now urging everyone to stay home.

After constant warnings from health officials, a mega-church in California finally began honoring mass gathering restrictions. However, the church’s members began holding “Bible studies” in their homes, with church leadership appearing to do little to stop it. At last count, over 70 members have been diagnosed with Covid-19.

At a church in Glenview, Illinois, the pastor, his family and at least 10 other parishioners have tested positive for Covid-19. Over 30 more have developed Covid-19 symptoms; so far, everyone who gets tested for the virus is confirmed positive. This has all happened after a service in March where no attendance advisories were followed.

On April 3, the Sacramento County (California) public health director stated that one-third of all Covid-19 cases in the county have been directly linked to places of worship.

The pastor of a large church in Louisiana steadfastly refused to honor the state’s restrictions on mass gatherings, declaring that they were not going to be intimidated by a virus and that the government was not shutting them down. He was quoted as saying,

“The virus, we believe, is politically motivated. We hold our religious rights dear and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says.” According to the pastor, over 1,300 people attended the church’s Easter Sunday service. Prior to the Easter service, the pastor told a news reporter, “Satan and a virus will not stop us... God will shield us from all harm and sickness. We are not afraid.” Since then, one member has died, with the cause of death officially listed as “acute respiratory distress syndrome, 2nd pneumonia, 2nd Covid-19.” The church’s attorney has also tested positive for Covid-19. It has not yet been reported how many more members may have contracted the sickness.

How many of these illnesses and deaths might have been prevented if the churches had observed the temporary mass gathering advisories? Notice the pastor in the last story stated, “God will shield us from all harm and sickness.” That reminds me of a passage of scripture so many Christians are referencing during this time: the 91st Psalm.

¹He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. ²I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

³Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. ⁴He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. ⁵Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; ⁶Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday. ⁷A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. ⁸Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.

⁹Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; ¹⁰There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling. ¹¹For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. ¹²They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. ¹³Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

¹⁴Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. ¹⁵He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. ¹⁶With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.

This is an incredibly powerful Psalm, one that has been read in church after church and posted repeatedly on the internet. Christians focus especially on verse ten, confessing it over themselves and their family: “There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.” The problem is that this is a conditional promise; unless we meet the conditions qualifying us for the promise, our confession is rendered less effective. So, what are those conditions?

¹He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. Being born again does NOT mean you are constantly dwelling and abiding in God’s presence. A person can be a Christian yet have a very passive relationship with God. Dwelling in His secret place and abiding under His shadow demands we seek quality time with Him daily.

²I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Just because you say that the Lord is your refuge and fortress, and that you trust in Him, does NOT mean that is what you are actually doing. Many people call themselves a Christian, yet they are not truly born again. The reality of this verse is the fruit of doing verse one. If you are spending quality time with Him, you eventually come to the place of having an unshakable, living trust in God that supersedes all challenging external conditions.

⁹Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; This is very similar to verse one, and serves as a reminder that having God as our refuge and habitation is NOT automatic, it is something we must actively pursue, or it will not happen.

¹⁴Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name. Do you truly love the Lord? In John 14:15, Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” Loving Him means living according to God’s standards of holiness and righteousness. The “Sunday morning Christian” does not really love the Lord. In addition, the phrase “he hath known my name” implies a relationship of close, personal friendship that goes way beyond that of a casual acquaintance; it is the kind of relationship portrayed in Proverbs 18:24, “...there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” We know He wants to stick close to us, but do we stick close to Him?

It is out of a relationship with God described in verses one, two, nine and fourteen that we begin to experience His promises of protection. Too many Christians seem to think that once born again, they can do pretty much whatever they want, and God is going to automatically fulfill every promise He has made. That is absolutely not the way it works. When Christians proclaim Psalm 91:10 over their lives, yet do not have a vibrant, growing walk with the Lord, they are taking that verse out of context.

This is very similar to what happened to the Jews in a war with the Philistines. In 1 Samuel chapter four, the Philistines attacked Israel. The battle wasn’t going well for the Jews, so they sent a message to the priests Hophni and Phineas to bring the Ark of the Covenant. When the Ark arrived in the camp of the Jewish army, the people began shouting as though the battle was already won. The Philistines heard the shout, realized the Ark was present, and assumed they were going to be soundly defeated. However, when the battle resumed the Philistines not only won decisively, they captured the ark.

You see, the Jews knew they had a covenant with God, they knew they had the Ark of the Covenant – which represented God’s presence – and they had always seen victory in the past. They reasoned that since this was true, they were again guaranteed victory. However, they failed to address the compromise that had crept in and acknowledge that their relationship with God was not what it had been. We may be born again and have a Bible full of promises from God, but if our walk with Him has been compromised, we may not see the promises fulfilled as we hope.

One area of compromise is how we as Christians – especially Pastors – respect the temporary guidelines and advisories regarding mass gatherings. Consider what the Apostle Paul wrote,

¹Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. ²Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves

damnation. ³For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: ⁴For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. ⁵Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. (Romans 13:1-5)

God honors authority, and our governmental authorities are not asking us to do that which is sin. We are being asked to join with them is helping to protect people from a terrible virus that has killed over 180,000 world-wide. What kind of example are we setting by demonstrating open rebellion to our leaders who are just trying to keep us alive? Not only that, but God clearly states that if we rise up in this kind of resistance to leaders, we are actually resisting a commandment He has given us. When this happens, we can face deserved, God-ordained legal action (verse four). Those operating by the mind of Christ and the wisdom of God will clearly understand the value of restricting mass gatherings.

As a pastor, I will honor God by honoring the mass gathering advisories. Also, as attendance restrictions are lifted, I will be slow to immediately “return to normal” regarding attendance until I know God has released us as a church to do so. Shepherds have great responsibility tending to the sheep of God’s pasture.

The end of the Covid-19 crisis is near. Yes, many things will be different, but nothing will change in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is – and always will be – the same. God’s Word is firmly established as our eternal truth. Stop fretting over restrictions and limitations. Instead, rejoice that your name is written in God’s Book of Life. Press into God like never before, increasing your time in prayer, worship, the Word, and even fasting. We are the children of Almighty God and we have access to the answer to every problem that arises. We have the victory...Hallelujah!

In His Grace,

Jim

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