

## Should a Christian Wear a Mask to Church?

Romans 14:1-12

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, January 9, 2022

Well, I just want to say thank you for driving through the snow to get here today. I guess after a year of heat waves and floods and forest fires, it's only fitting that we end with a Snowmageddon. And that's what we've done. And thank you for coming today.

I want to invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Romans. That's the book we're in this morning. And to get us started, if you would, please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Romans. And as you're turning there, I want to tell you this is a good passage to go to in order to talk about this first issue that we want to look at because on November 30 of last year, the government passed a law which said that you have to wear a mask in order to go to church; you have to put one on or else you are breaking the law. Now to be fair, they said that you don't have to do it. If everyone is vaccinated, you can take your mask off if everybody's had their shot. But if not, that is the requirement, which puts us in a difficult position as a church because it makes you ask the question: do we comply or do we not? Do we say okay and give into that or do we resist? I mean what does that look like? Do we post guards at the door in order to keep the unmasked people out? Do we give our ushers tasers and tell them to attack anybody who's not wearing one? Some of the deacons have been asking for tasers lately and we've said no.

Make we make fun of it, but really the question is, how do you police this? What are you supposed to do? And to answer that I want to read our passage for today. So if you look at Romans 14 with me, that's our text that we're going to talk about. In Romans 14, Paul writes,

“Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards everyday alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it from the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end, Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

But you, why do you judge your brother? Are you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

“As I live,” says the Lord, “Every knee shall bow to Me and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determined this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him, it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up one another, Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is not good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or do anything by which your brother stumbles.

And we will end the reading there. As you can tell by reading that, Paul doesn't talk directly about the issue of masks here, because they didn't have those back then; that wasn't something they were dealing with in the first century. But he does talk about another issue that's going on in the life of the church, and that was the issue of food or holy days. You see those mentioned in verse two and verse five, because that was a controversial issue then. And we'll say a little more about that in a moment. But just to give you some background for the book, the book of Romans, has been called Paul's magnum opus, or the greatest thing that he ever wrote. You can actually see that in the size of it, because it contains 7000 words, which makes it 70 times larger than the average letter at the time. The average letter back then came to about 100 words or so. So if you go through the New Testament, and you come to the book of Philemon, that was the size of the average letter at this time, but Romans is so much bigger than that because Paul had so much more to say. They would roll their letters in parchment back then, which means that the more words you have, the fatter the roll, and you can imagine carrying this massive chunk around with you to take it to this church. That's what it would look like. And the main theme of the book is found back in chapter one, verse 16. Paul says, "For I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, for as it is written, 'but the righteous man shall live by faith.'" You see the word righteousness repeated there a couple times, because that's the theme of this book. Romans tells you how someone can be righteous. They tell you how a man who was dead in sins and lost and alienated from God can be made right with Him. Paul says you do it through faith in the Gospel. "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith." That means from Christ to Christ, because that's how you're saved. Start with Christ and end in Christ, which brings you to chapter 14.

If you turn back to chapter 14, Paul alludes to this when he says, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, without passing judgment on him." When Paul mentions the weak one here, he's referring to someone who is weak in all the things he's talking about in the book of Romans. He's weakened his understanding of Christ and the gospel and the cross and the resurrection and how it all works, because he believes in it, trusts in it. But he's too caught up in food. In verse two, he looks to Christ. He loves Christ. But this brother is still stuck on silly things like which day he wants to observe in verse five, and all that kind of stuff. So Paul says, You need to go easy on a guy like that. Don't be too hard on him. Because Christ died for him, too. In fact, he actually tells you in verse one to accept this man. It means to take him into yourself or draw him in, don't push this guy away. So many Christians are so opinionated. Nowadays, all they do is push people away from them. Paul tells you to do the opposite here because Jesus saved him just like he saved you. You weren't saved because you were a strong brother. You weren't saved because you had your life all together and had it all figured out. It was just the opposite. And it's the same way with him. So Paul says, You need to be gracious to a man like this.

And here's how this applies to us today. Here's what this means for us. There are Christians today who think they're sinning if they don't wear a mask to church, right? You guys know what I'm talking about. We've met them before. They genuinely believe, sincerely believe, they're disobeying God if they don't follow all the rules and keep all the mandates, and nail the restrictions down to a letter with the government. And on the flip side, there's other Christians who feel like they're sinning if they do that. They think they're disobeying God if they put a mask on and bring it to church, to the point that they cause a ruckus about it. They're splitting churches, some of them. And here's what Paul says about that. In this passage, he says they're both the weaker brother. Shocking, isn't it? He says they're both immature in the faith, because that's not what the Christian life is all about. It's not about whether you keep a bunch of rules or not, or break them. It's about following Christ; He is our righteousness. He's the one who makes us right with God, not your food, not your mask, not your vaccines. The way some people talk today, you would think that if Paul was writing a chapter like this, he would spend all his time laying down rules. And he would spend all his time giving you 100 different steps for what to eat and what to drink and which day to follow. But he doesn't do that stuff in here because none of that stuff saves you as a Christian; it won't get you into heaven. So you shouldn't let it bother you so much. Down here, to say it another way, when you read this passage, one thing that strikes you is how gracious it is because Paul is being humble here. He says that the church is not about me having things my way and getting what I want all the time. And standing up for my rights. The church is about standing up for the rights of others. It's about putting them first.

If you look in verse 13, Paul says, "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way." This means that whatever you do with masks, your primary goal is not to put a stumbling block in someone's way; you don't want to hinder their worship of God. And in verse 21, a little further down, it says that it's good **not** to eat meat or drink wine or do anything by which your brother stumbles. And that's interesting, because now he takes it even further. And he says, Not only should you avoid meat or wine, if it causes your brother to stumble, but you need to avoid anything, whatever it may be. Stay away from any subject that could tempt him to evil, because that's what the stronger brother does. He doesn't think about himself, he puts others first. He's the stronger brother here. He's not strong in the sense that he's bossy or pushy or demanding. He's strong in the sense that he's the opposite of that. He's not great in the sense that he has his own agenda all the time. And he promotes his own thing when he comes to church. He's strong in the sense that he is the most selfless guy in the room. He's the most well-mannered person. That's the stronger brother.

You guys have studied the life of the apostle Paul before. Can you imagine how opinionated Paul was by personality? Paul was the kind of guy you would never ask him, "Paul, what do you think about this?" And he would say, "I don't know, I hadn't thought about it." He just didn't have that personality. But he writes this in this chapter to remind you that you have to put your personality aside for a moment. For others. This is important because I don't have to tell you people are becoming so angry about this issue right now. They're becoming almost violent, because everybody has an opinion. Most people have one or two or three or four opinions, to the point that they're fighting. I spoke with one pastor up the road in another town and told me in the town he lives in, he has seen four churches split over this issue in the last two years. Four of them. Everyone is just thinking about themselves. They're acting like the weaker brother.

This is also important because there are other people who they don't split churches over this, but they drive everybody nuts because they can't stop talking about it. Every time they open their mouth, they go into a long

discussion about how messed up things are right now. Listen, friends, we all know things are messed up right now. Everybody's wearing masks. That's weird. We all know something's going on. But the issue is this, the church is not built on what you believe about politics, or the news. It's built on what you believe about Christ. We're supposed to prioritize Him, not anything else.

You know, the Christian apologist, Francis Schaffer used to talk about this a lot in the 1960s. Because back then everybody was arguing about clothes and hair because the hippie movement was underway. And so everybody was arguing about their tie dyed shirts and their blue jeans and that sort of thing. So here was his advice on that. He said that in the Alps, where he lives in Switzerland, there are deep chasms between one mountain and another that you can't cross. Some of them are so big that they separate towns and whole communities. And he said that the worst thing you can do when you're traveling there is to misplace one of them on a map, because it'll get you lost and take you down a terrible road. And he said, it's the same way with things like your clothes and your hair. You don't want to misplace that on a map. You don't want to make a chasm out of that, and let it separate you from other Christians, because you'll regret it. And it's the same way with this. Some Christians are so caught up in this issue of masks right now that they think it's the defining issue in the church. But let me tell you something, it's not. As we're going to see next week, there are far worse things to worry about than this. Because Bill C4 is a much bigger problem for the church in Canada. As far as I know, no one's ever gotten a five year prison sentence for not wearing a mask. But you can with this. That bill spells that out for you. So you've got to keep this in perspective, we've got bigger fish to fry than this, we have larger things going on. And we have to learn how to handle it and stay unified.

As I told you last time, the time for getting upset about this and losing your mind and going crazy is over. That's really not an option anymore for the church. You have to be smart about this. And that's what we're going to talk about today. So if you're taking notes, in Romans 14, we're going to talk about three ways to stay unified on the issue of masks. In the first half of this chapter in Romans 14 verses one through 12, we're going to look at three ways to stay unified on the issue of masks because that's our goal as a church, we want to stay unified in this. We don't want to see things split up in our congregation where you have a masked versus unmasked camp, or a vaccinated versus unvaccinated group; we have no desire to do that. We actually hear stories of churches right now doing that because they're asking their people to show their passports when they walk through the door. I've heard of churches stopping services because people would not all wear their masks or closing the whole thing down. We're not going to do that.

Now, having said that, I hope you understand that due to our circumstances, we have to ask people to wear a mask when they come here to worship, because we're renting the building and our landlords are requiring that, but I can also tell you that we have no interest in being Gestapo about this and tasing you at the door. We want you to feel free to come as you are. There's room for disagreement in this. In fact, since that last restriction was passed, I've had several members of our church come up to me and say, you know, Pastor Jeremy, if you would have asked me to wear a mask a year ago, I would not have done it, I would have stood up for my rights. But now I realize it doesn't matter anymore. Because I just want to go to church. It's all that matters to me. I just want to be with my brothers and sisters in Christ. And I've had other people come and say, you know, if you would have told me a year ago that some of the people in this room would not wear a mask, I would have said that said the same thing. But they said, "You know what, I realized now that I just want to love my brother in this and put him first." And I applaud you for that, because that's what the stronger brother does. You think about others before yourself. And we're going to talk about that this morning by looking at three ways to stay unified on the issue of masks.

The first one is to remember that God has accepted us, which means that He has received us and forgiven us through our faith in Him, whether you wear a mask or not. If you would, look at verse one again, Paul writes, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him." Now, as you read that, it may sound strange to you, because the background is not familiar, but what Paul is referring to here is the ancient pagan custom of avoiding certain food whenever you ate. You actually see the word "food" or "eat" mentioned several times in here, because the pagans were very finicky about that. They believed in reincarnation. They thought that if you died, your soul came back as an animal or a sheep or goat, and so out of concern for that, they avoided eating those things because they didn't want to eat someone else's soul. That sounds kind of strange to us. But if you would go to a country like India today, you would see people starving on the street and cows walking around unharmed. The reason they don't eat those cows is because they think that somebody's soul is in there. It was the same way back then to the point that when someone got saved out of that lifestyle, they had a hard time letting it go. I mean, it was really difficult for them. On the other hand, some of the Jews did the same thing as well, because the Old Testament forbade certain animals. The Jews couldn't eat certain things like a camel or a rabbit or a bat, according to the Old Testament, not that you would really want to eat a bat anyway. Maybe if you put mustard on it, I don't know. But they could eat other things like sheep and goats. But the point is that this is the world Paul's writing to at the time. This is the culture. So if you had someone over for dinner, and you offered them bat, they would be horrified by that. They would think it was a sin. Or if they sat down at your table, and you gave them a rabbit sandwich, or a camel to eat or something, they would freak out. There are even stories that have come down to us today of Jews preferring starvation to the food they were given when they were in exile in Babylon. They chose to starve to death rather than eat that stuff. And Paul says in light of this, this is how you need to respond to that. He says the one who eats is not to regard with contempt, the one who does not eat. He says don't show contempt for them. If someone struggles with this, the word contempt here is a strong word that means to despise someone or look down your nose at them. In other words, the one who eats all meats is not to look at his brother and say I'm better than you because I'm not so picky about this. I got over that a long time ago. Not supposed to do that. I'm better than you because that doesn't bother me. I can eat whatever I want. He also says the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who does. He's not to look down at his fellow Christian either and say I'm better than you because I have this preference. I have this conviction and it puts me on a higher level than you. It makes me up here while you're down here.

We've had people come into our church, and they've had some random conviction about some random thing and they want to tell everybody you have to do the one thing I want. Ladies can't wear jeans to church. Men can't have long hair.

Why is Paul taking this position? Paul was a Jew, he was a Pharisee. He knew all the food laws, why would he? Why would he approach it this way? Verse three says, "For God has accepted them both." Remember He made both of them righteous; He saves both of them through faith in Christ. He didn't save them through food. He saved them through faith. He didn't save them through their diet. He saved them through their trust in Christ. So they need to look at each other that way, it's not like one of them was saved one way and one was saved another. It's not like one guy is going to heaven because of his diet and the other one's going to hell. No, they're both going the same way. So they need to have mutual respect for one another.

I mentioned that because I think Paul would say the same thing to us today about the Coronavirus. It doesn't matter whether you wear a mask or not, when you come to church; it doesn't matter if you keep every jot and tittle of the law. What matters the most in this passage anyway is your brother. What is important is the way you think about him, not yourself. Not your own ideas, not your own thoughts about the government, not your own opinions about politics. What matters is the person sitting next to you. Yes, you need to respect the law and obey the governing authorities where you can, and you need to do everything you can to keep people safe. But as you do that, this is what really matters. The one who wears a mask is not to regard with contempt, the one who does not. Which means that when you look at someone who wears a mask, or doesn't wear one and you despise them, this is what you're doing. You're rejecting someone that God has accepted. You can condemn a soul that He has received because you think you're better than him, you know more than God does. And that's a terrible thing today. That is incredibly arrogant.

Friends, let's be honest, this is a real problem for us today. And I just mentioned all the division that this issue is caused. But I didn't tell you about all the pride that is rising up in people's hearts, because some people think that as long as I wear a mask to church, and I don't think this is our church, but I've heard of this and other congregations, as long as I wear a mask to church, I'm better than you. I'm holier as long as I'm vaccinated. Because I'm doing the will of God, I'm keeping the law while you're not. But what they forget is that it's not that simple. Because God didn't tell you to do that, the government did. God didn't put these laws in place about wearing a mask and washing your hands and staying six feet apart, you're not going to see that in the Old Testament, you won't see it in the New Testament, our politicians made those up. Not being disrespectful, that's just a fact. And we're all just trying to figure out how to handle it. We're all trying to understand what we can do. So there's no reason to think and it makes you better because it doesn't.

On the other hand, other people think as long as they take their mask off, they're doing the will of God. They're doing what He wants, because they're leading the rebellion and standing up against tyranny and oppression and that sort of thing. But what they forget is that we don't work for the government here. When you come into church with that kind of attitude, you're not fighting them, you're fighting us. I'm not on the government's payroll. If you want to fight the government, do it someplace else. But in here, you have to get along. Now, please understand me. I'm not saying that it's wrong to show wisdom in these things and be cautious. Because it's not. And I'm not saying there's not a place to resist the government because there is a place to do that. I just told you everything we're talking about this month is illegal. In fact, we've done this ourselves. I mean, you may not realize this, but back when we're meeting outside the tent, the government told us to put the sides down in the tent. And we said no, because it was cold outside. I remember thinking more people are going to get sick with the virus if we leave those walls up. So we put them down. You guys were miserable. I remember some of you guys shaking during the sermon, not because the Holy Spirit was upon you, but because it was 10 degrees outside. They told us not to sing. We sang. It had been months since our people worshipped God. We're not going to stop you from doing that. They told us to turn people away who didn't wear masks. We didn't do that.

But the point is that when we made those decisions, we didn't do it in a spirit of pride. As a church, we didn't do it to say that I'm better than you, or to say that we're better than that congregation. Because that's the wrong way to do things as a church. In fact, if we're being honest about it, I think we all need to be really humble about this, because nobody is following all the orders of the law perfectly right now. Nobody. We've all seen pictures of our politicians taking their masks off and shaking hands at certain important events. Because even they can't keep the

law. Nobody stayed six feet apart this whole time, nobody's remained in their bubble. So we all need to be gracious about this. And kind to one another.

There is a story told about the time that Charles Spurgeon got into a debate with a preacher named Joseph Parker in London, because he went to the theater. Back then theaters were not a nice place to go, because they often show crude plays. And so when Spurgeon heard that Parker was attending one, he attacked him in the local newspaper, which was not a good idea, because as Parker pointed out that Spurgeon smoked cigars and he drank and he was overweight, because he worked too hard. He didn't take good care of himself. And so in response to that the newspaper told Spurgeon, don't judge others before you judge yourself. I'm a fan of Charles Spurgeon. But I think that's good advice. We shouldn't point fingers at others, until we point them back at the mirror first, which brings us to another way to stay unified on this issue of masks.

Another way to stay unified on the issue of masks is to remember that God is the one in charge of all of this, not us. First one is to remember that God has accepted us. I mean, no matter what your position is on these things, God has received us through faith, He hasn't pushed us away. And so the least we could do is do the same toward other people, in spite of our differences. When you really think about this, it takes the edge off because God should send us to hell, every single one of us. He should throw us in the lake of fire, because we've sinned against Him over and over again, but He has forgiven us, He has embraced us. He's reconciled us with Himself through Christ, we should be able to reconcile it with each other, which brings us to the second way to stay unified on this issue.

And that is to remember that God is the one in charge, which means that he is the one calling the shots in the church. So when you come here, you shouldn't expect to have it your way, because this is not about you having it your way. This is about God having it His way. And if you look at verse one again, just to get the context, he says, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls, and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." As you read that, you can tell Paul is building an argument here, he's working up to something. Because after saying that God has received everyone in the church on the basis of faith, he now says here is why God can do that: because He is the master. He is the one in charge.

To demonstrate this, Paul gives you a rhetorical question in verse four, because he says, "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" In other words, when people come to church, who are you to criticize them, because they don't work for you anyway. They're not coming here for you. Ultimately, they're coming here for God. So you need to cut that out. Verse four says to his own master he stands or falls, and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand. And that's kind of hard to read. But it means to his own master, he stands or falls when it comes to the issue of food. Because your brother won't answer to you for those things, he will answer to God. When it comes to his diet and his position on that type of stuff. He's going to answer to the Lord Jesus Christ. So you can keep your nose out of it.

In verse five it says, "One person regards one day above another, another regards everyday alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God." Now, Paul gives you another illustration here, and I want to talk

about that because it kind of fills out what we're talking about. But he talks about one person regarding one day above another, that's referring to the Jewish practice of keeping certain holy days on their calendar. Not only did they have food laws, but they also had about half a dozen or so days that they were commanded to follow in the Old Testament like the Day of Atonement. Remember that? The Feast of Tabernacles, the Passover, when you added all the extra ones later on, it grew because then they had the Feast of Hanukkah and the Feast of Purim. And the interesting thing about all those days is when you put them together, it lasted about three months. Can you imagine celebrating holy days for three months? Because many of them went on for several weeks, they would have songs and sermons and sacrifices, they would have food and games and activities; it was a drawn out affair, which means it was a big part of what it meant to be Jewish, so that when they got saved, they had a hard time giving that up as well. You can imagine, if you spent your entire life taking about a fourth of the year to celebrate that stuff, you're not going to stop it on a dime, it's going to be a struggle. And Paul, who knew that more than anybody says that you should respond by going easy on them. Don't beat up on those people. Because they do it unto the Lord. He who observes the day observes it for the Lord, which means they have a good reason for doing it. This isn't just a ritual for them. It's not a ceremony, they truly believe God is pleased when they keep the holy days. And the last thing you want to do is tear them down over that. Because it will cause them to sin against their conscience.

And here's what this has to do with us. It doesn't really matter whether you wear a mask or not primarily, what matters is your motivation. It doesn't matter whether you take the vaccine or choose not to. The thing that matters is what are you doing it for? What's the reason behind your decision? I know it's a controversial thing today, anytime you talk about breaking the law, but we look at it like this, it was against the law, the Old Testament law for the Jews to ignore their holy days. It was illegal. If you were a Jew living in Jerusalem, it was a crime punishable by excommunication from the synagogue; they would throw you out. It was the same way with the food laws. But some of them did it anyway, some of them didn't. They had different opinions about that. But Paul says either way, it's okay because it goes back to your conscience. However you choose to respond to that is strictly between you and God, which means you shouldn't do it just because you were pressured into it by the government. You shouldn't do it because your friends or family told you to, you should do it because you think it's right. The burden is on your shoulders.

This is important because they've done studies on this. And they found that if a person walks into a room full of masks, they'll put one on. Now they'll take it out of their pocket and wear it. But if they walk into a room where people are not wearing them, they'll do the opposite, you know, they'll just kind of take it off and shove it away. But I want you to notice in this passage, Paul doesn't tell you to do that here. He doesn't say you just need to go with the flow on this issue. Verse five says each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. That means each person needs to be sure in their own heart that what they're doing pleases the Lord, because it's a personal decision. It's not something that needs to be crammed down your throat. I think this is one of the greatest reasons why some churches have resisted the government lately on this issue, because they don't want the government cramming things down their throat and I get that I think we all do. There's a place for defying the governing authorities in the Bible, you see it in the New Testament. But even then, even when you choose to defy, you have to ask yourself, what am I doing it for? Am I doing it to please the Lord? Or am I doing it just because I'm mad? My doing it to give Him glory and give Him praise and be unified with my brother in Christ? Or am I doing it to put my leaders in their place? because that's not a good reason to defy. You don't see that in this passage. In fact, I've spoken with some of the churches that have defied these orders. And they've told me that while I'm on the one hand, some of their ministries have grown and they're grateful for that. At the same time, they've also noted that a



lot of these new people that coming aren't saved. They're just coming for political reasons. And that's wrong. The church is not here to promote your political agenda. You have to remember that.

To say it another way, another thing that Paul is telling us here is that when it comes to masks and this issue of vaccines and those types of things, there's a lot of soul searching that has to take place before you make a decision. You have to examine your heart in this because if you notice as you read this chapter, Paul is talking to you here. He's not telling you what to tell others. He's speaking directly to your soul. He's not telling you to go hide around behind the bushes and become the COVID police which is hard to do and so much harder to examine your own heart but that's the focus of it. In fact, this was a concern for us as an Elder and Deacon board, because when we decided to meet inside and wear masks, instead of going back to the tent, one thing we said is that we don't want to be heavy handed about this. Because it's not our job to determine who gets to come to church. It's God's job. It's not our job to screen people's heart at the door and say this one is ready for worship. And that one is not because they have their mask on. That's your job. It's your job to determine when you're ready to worship. We want to keep it that way. When you worship, God is not interested in external things anyway. He didn't care what you ate or what you wore or what you had put across your face. He's interested in your heart. He wants to know what's going on in your soul. And that's what you have to focus on when you come here.

Since the Coronavirus has occurred, I have met people who are mad and I mean sinfully angry at other Christians. But they thought they were justified in it because they had their mask on. Couldn't see their mouth, but their eyes were bloodshot. They were really angry. And I've met other people who were vaccinated but they were slandering other people over this. "Can you believe what so and so's doing?" And they thought they were justified in it. And Paul says that you're not. God would rather you forget about all that and pay attention to your sin first. That's what worship is all about. Put away your anger, and put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to one more way to stay unified on the issue of masks, just to review these other ones, the first one is to remember that God has accepted us. And then secondly, remember that God is the one in charge, not you and me. This is His church, so He's the one who sets the standard. He's the one who tells us how to look at the issue of masks and vaccines, and food and all those sorts of things. And what He says is that those things don't matter as much as this, you need to get your heart right first. And this is easy to forget because it's so much simpler just to put a mask on and go to church and think you're fine. So much simpler to pull out your vaccine passport, walk through the door, and think whatever evil thoughts you want. But God doesn't want you to do that. He wants so much more.

And it brings us to one more way to stay unified on this issue, and that is to remember that God is the judge. A third way to stay unified on this issue of masks is to remember that God is the judge, which means that He is the one that people will answer to, not us. So we don't have to be so critical toward everybody about that. That's not our job. And if you look in verse 10, Paul says it this way, he says, "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live,' says the Lord, 'Every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God." If you notice, Paul starts off this section with another rhetorical question. And he does that because this was a sensitive subject for the church in Rome. This was kind of a hot topic. And one way to handle those types of things is to ask your audience questions in a kind, gracious way. He did that in verse four. He does it again here. Because there he said, "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" And now he says, "Who are you to judge your brother?" He mentions judgment in both

of those verses because this is what the chapter is about at the end of the day. This is the problem that was going on in the church. People were judging each other. They were being critical because they were looking around the room and saying, "Well, he eats this and she eats that. He likes this day. She likes that day. What a fool. What an idiot. Paul says you have to stop it because he says, "Why do you regard your brother with contempt?" That's the second time he uses the word contempt here as well. Because apparently, this is how the people were judging each other. They were being contemptuous. They were looking down their noses. And Paul says you have to cut that out for we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

It's a very sobering passage there but to explain that the word for judgment seat here is the Greek word *Bema* from which we get the term Bema Seat. Some of you have heard of that before. That's where the word comes from. And it's an interesting one that has a rich history, because he referred to the place where the judges sat during the athletic events in the ancient world. The ancient people had several athletic competitions. They had the Olympic Games in Greece, and the Isthmian games in Corinth, and the Pythian Games in Italy, where people would run and fight and wrestle each other. They would swim and box and do chariot races. It must have been something to see. And in front of all those competitors was a large grandstand where several rows of chairs were placed for the magistrates to sit in and reward the victor. And they were called the Bema Seat, the judgment seat. Paul uses that word here, because it's a good illustration of what Christ will one day do for us as Christians when we die. The Lord will judge us, not in a harsh way, but in a gracious way. He'll call us to account for every deed, not to punish us, but to reward us and say, "Well done my good and faithful servant." But Paul's point here that he's making is that everyone's going to go through that. You, me and the guy next door. If you trust in Christ, everyone's going to be under this scrutiny, no matter what your position is on masks. So you shouldn't be too judgmental about it. You shouldn't be so harsh to other people when you know Christ is going to do the same thing to you.

It's a really silly thing to judge the guy sitting next to you, and you're about to go in the courtroom and get judged yourself because your place is not in the Bema Seat. That's not where you belong. You know, you don't sit up there on the stage and look down at the competitors. Christ is. And that should put this all in perspective. In fact, when Paul says in verse 11, " 'As I live', says the Lord, 'Every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall give praise to God.' " He's quoting the book of Isaiah there to say that one day everyone's going to answer to God, the big and the little, the great, and the small, the masked and the unmasked, the vaccinated and the unvaccinated, they're all going to bow the knee to Him. So we have to let that sink in before we go out and attack people over this. We're all on the same playing field here. Now, like half the church is up here and the other half is down here. We're all down here. I mentioned this because another problem is this: people are becoming so judgmental right now, aren't they? They're becoming so critical toward each other's neighbours, phoning against neighbours, people yelling at each other in the store. I remember talking to several young couples who were getting married a year ago, and they were so worried they might be breaking the law, because they had 22 people come into their wedding instead of 20. They were so concerned their neighbors might call the police. And I had to remind them you're getting married, you're not selling drugs. If you have 21 people show up and your neighbours get mad, let them get mad, I'll go pray with them. This is supposed to be the happiest day of your life. What are we coming to as a society when young people are scared to death to get married? I talked to other people who wanted to see their family for Christmas. They wanted to drop by and say hello. But the family wouldn't let him do it because they weren't vaccinated. And they were upset about it because they felt like they were being judged. And Paul reminds you hear that in moments like that, as a Christian, you have to realize there's only one person who can judge you. And that's the Lord. There's only one person who will condemn you for your behavior, or look over it.

And that's Him, which should give you a sense of peace about this. You don't have to worry about what everybody else thinks about you.

Pastor James Montgomery Boyce said this in the 1980s, he wrote and said “In the 14th chapter of Romans, Paul has been explaining why Christians must not be harsh to one another. And one of the reasons he gives is that we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. In other words, Christ will judge us so we shouldn't judge each other. On that day, there'll be no pleading someone else's responsibility for what we've done or blaming them for our faults, because we'll all have to answer for that on our own.” If nothing else gets us thinking about our conduct, it should be this because it's sobering, but it's also freeing at the same time. It gives us liberty as a Christian because as long as we're pleasing God, it doesn't matter who we're not pleasing. As long as God is happy with us, it doesn't matter who's mad and he's right. Listen, friends, you serve an audience of one. You're only trying to please one master and that's it. He just wants you to love each other at a time like this. That's all He wants. He wants you to show grace.

Listen, I promise you that when you stand before the Lord on judgement day, God will not ask you if you were vaccinated or not. He won't. If you haven't heard anything else I've said this morning, please hear that. And He won't ask you if you wore a mask or washed your hands or stayed six feet apart, or remained in your bubble. He will only ask if you trusted in Christ, if you believe in Him. And that's all you need to worry about. Now, don't let all this other stuff drive you crazy. There's enough craziness in the culture already. You can be calm, let's all be calm today. I mean, this is so different from the way most of us think about this issue. And then we spend so much time getting caught up in all these other things that we forget that God doesn't do that. He focuses on other stuff. And we should learn from His example. In fact, this is so important that we're going to take some more time to talk about this again in a few weeks. Because as you can tell from looking at the chapter, we're not done with it only got halfway through. So we want to come back and study it again on January 23. Because we want Paul's message to sink in for us. And that is that we shouldn't fight over masks. We can fight over other things, and fight for the Gospel. Next week, we're going to talk about fighting for what the Bible says about human sexuality and marriage and those types of things. But let's not fight over this.

In my studies this week, I came across a story of the time that the United States first started drilling for oil in Saudi Arabia. And since it was a Muslim country, the king of Saudi Arabia asked, “Which one would you rather have: church or alcohol? Because they're both illegal here.” And they said alcohol, which startled the king because it showed him how messed up their priorities were. I tell you that story because Paul says you don't want to do that today as a church. You don't want to have messed up priorities like that and say that masks are more important than people are, or vaccines are more important than Christ and His Church and the unity that we have, because they're not. Christ is the most important thing of all, will you remember that today? Let me pray that you would and that God would give us grace in these things.

Heavenly Father, we do come to you this morning. asking for your help. We need your help, Lord, because none of us are sober minded in these things. We're all a little too emotionally caught up in this at times. We can't think straight, we can't pray straight. We can't get our minds on the way we should because there's so much chaos going on around us. We turn on the news and it's chaos. We talk to our neighbors and it's chaos. We go to work and it's chaos. We drive on the road and it's chaos. And yet with You, there's always peace. With You, there's always joy. There's always happiness. It's at Your right hand, fullness of joy. I guess this morning, we're asking for a taste of that as a church.

God, you've been so gracious to Grace fellowship, Chilliwack these last several years. I think about the fact I'm coming up on my fifth anniversary with the church and You brought so many people to us, you've done so many wonderful things in people's lives. And now we are asking You this morning, that this season of challenges would draw us closer together, not farther apart. Christ, you've saved us in the blood of Christ, you've washed our sins away, you've brought the prodigal home, you've made the dead come alive among us. And we want those things to be what we stand on, as Richard talked about so well in the children's lesson. That needs to be our foundation. God, would you help us to remember that today? Would you draw our minds back to that? Take our heads and turn them in the other direction. We don't want to think about worldly things right now, we want to think about eternal ones.

Lord, I pray for those who were here today. I don't know where everyone's from. I know we've had visitors, maybe some are lost and they don't know Christ. And we talk about this unity and this new life and this salvation and they don't know what we mean by that. Lord, I pray that You would open their eyes to the fact that Jesus has come to save sinners and that means every sinner and would you make them a part of us as well? Lord, in all these things, we just want you to be glorified. We want Christ to be set on high just the same way the Apostle Paul wanted for the church 2000 years ago. That's what we want today, Lord. Would you please graciously answer our prayers in that regard and we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.