

Why It Was Right to Cancel Public Church Gatherings

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Preacher: Fred Stone

[0 : 00] Okay. Okay. It's hard to believe that we are in the ninth consecutive week of not meeting together in this building for worship.

But Lord willing, we will be together next Sunday, May the 24th. We're going to have three services. Hopefully you already know that, that 8 o'clock at 9.30 and 11 a.m.

Now, since we will be practicing social distancing, things will look a little different. But I think once we get together, everything will just feel right because we're back together as God's people, worshiping Him, praising Him, studying His Word together.

It's going to be a great day. I think it'll be a real special day as we come back together after all this time apart. Now, as churches begin to regather, expect to hear and see things that are critical of the fact that we have not been meeting, that we've closed our doors in response to this COVID-19 pandemic.

Some will criticize Christian leaders for not taking a stand against the government. Some are going to say all this is, is Christians have compromised.

[1 : 32] They've caved in to government overreach. In fact, some are already saying that. Well, I have refrained from addressing this issue throughout our time of being away.

It's been my goal, my prayer, to bring messages from God's Word that comfort, that encourage, that give hope during this time.

But today, our final time together online, away from publicly gathering together for worship.

Today, I want us to look at three biblically-based reasons for why it was right for us to do what we've done and not be together as a way to combat the coronavirus.

First, we have demonstrated love by stopping our large group gatherings. We have demonstrated love by not meeting together.

[2 : 34] Let me explain how that is. Most of you are familiar with the way Jesus responded to the question, what is the greatest commandment? It's recorded in Mark chapter 12 and in Matthew chapter 22.

Look with me in Matthew 22 as we read this, beginning in verse 36. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

And note that Jesus was only asked one question. What's the greatest commandment in the law? Well, Jesus answered that question, but he continued.

He did not stop. And he went on to say, And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus made it very clear. Our love for God cannot be separated from our love for people.

[3 : 46] If we love God, we must love people who have been created in his image. Now, Jesus further explained our responsibility to love our neighbor in Luke chapter 10 in the story of the Good Samaritan.

Many of you are familiar with that story. Well, Jesus told it in response to the question, Who is my neighbor? The story of the Good Samaritan is Jesus' answer to that question.

Here's the answer. Whoever God places in your path that has a need that you can meet, Well, that's your neighbor. That's who you are to love as yourself.

Now, to love our neighbor as ourselves, let's just think about it practically. That means we seek the welfare. We seek the good of whoever God places in our lives to the best of our ability.

Now, we can apply that in a lot of ways. It needs to be first applied at home. People we live with. Some of you know what it means to apply it with the people you work with, maybe the people in your neighborhood, or occasionally a stranger God brings into your life that you need to love as that good Samaritan did.

[5 : 10] But right now, let's apply the principle of love your neighbor as yourself to the coronavirus pandemic. Health care experts have found that one of the most effective ways for stopping the spread of this virus is to practice social distancing.

That's why the CDC issued around mid-March a directive that called for the cancellation of any gathering over 50 people.

And they said to do that for the next eight weeks. Well, you know that it wasn't long before they lowered that to 10 people. And in South Carolina, we have been told that we are to limit public gatherings to no more than three, or three are even prohibited.

Now, the CDC's advisory resulted in the cancellation of virtually every large event, every large group gathering in our country, including all sports events.

Now, think about that. That was huge in this country. And then it was followed by schools, restaurants, businesses. Churches were either ordered or advised to close for the same reason.

[6 : 38] All these other businesses, large group gatherings, sports, were shut down to stop the spread of the coronavirus and save lives.

Loving our neighbor as ourselves, it means that we seek the welfare of the people around us. For the past two months, we have shown love by not meeting together to avoid exposing anyone to the coronavirus or spreading it.

Now, everybody I know has at least in some way tried to avoid exposing themselves to this virus. I know I have, and I'm sure you have as well. Why have we done that? Well, in light of the second commandment, it's because we love ourselves. We take care of ourselves.

And that's not being selfish or sinful. It's really just being human, isn't it? The reason Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself is because we naturally love ourselves and take care of ourselves.

[7 : 56] If I go outside and cross the street, I'm going to stop and look to make sure no cars are coming. I'm going to take care of myself and not step out in front of a car.

You do the same thing. You know, every year there is a rise in the number of flu cases around. Sometimes it's a large number of people coming down with the flu.

Every year I take note of that. I try to avoid being around people who have the flu because I don't want to catch it. And I know most of you do the same thing. All normal people do things like that. It's a part of our God-given sense of self-preservation or self-love. Just as we try to avoid exposing ourselves to anything that would harm us, including the coronavirus, love should compel us to do the same thing for others.

Just as we love ourselves, we look out for ourselves. So we should love others and look out for them. This is the reason why so many churches all across this country have voluntarily stopped meeting together publicly once it became known that it was best to avoid large public gatherings.

[9 : 24] Once it became known, that's one of the best ways to stop the spread of this terrible virus. Now, we here at Pickens First Baptist, we voluntarily chose to stop meeting the week of March the 15th when the governor closed our schools.

My thinking was, children, that age group, is the least likely group to have complications from the coronavirus that are serious and life-threatening.

Now, if DHEC says it's time to close schools because of the coronavirus, that said to me, it's time for us to stop gathering as a church.

I also realized the last Sunday that we met, on March the 15th, as I was just looking around during the services, we had a lot of individuals sitting here who are in the CDC's at-risk group for developing life-threatening complications from this coronavirus.

I realized, I thought about it that morning as we were going through the service, that if we had an outbreak of this among our church family, we very well could see some of our members die from it.

[10 : 54] And then that Monday, schools were canceled. I knew we must stop meeting. And every other leader in our church was in agreement.

The first and most important reason why we've stopped meeting together in our large group gatherings on Sundays is because we love our neighbor as ourselves.

It's been the right thing to do, the loving thing to do. That's not the only reason. Look at this. We have done our duty by stopping our large group gatherings.

We have a God-given responsibility to obey government authority unless that authority requires us to sin against God. You know the passage from Romans chapter 13 that stresses this.

Look with me if you would. Romans chapter 13. The entire section is verses 1 through 7. Let's just read verses 1 through 4 right now. Paul writes, Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

[12:01] For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval.

For he is God's servant for your good. Now think about when Paul wrote that, what his government leaders were like.

Paul wrote that living under the pagan Roman government. The emperor at that time was the brutal Nero.

So obviously, Paul is not commending that government or that emperor. His point though is that God uses all kinds of government, all kinds of government leaders, even evil ones, to accomplish his purpose.

[13:15] Now I want to be real honest. I am like most Americans today in that I don't really trust our government. I'm not very trusting at all when it comes to thinking about our government right now.

I agree wholeheartedly with my favorite president, Ronald Reagan, when he said, the most terrifying words in the English language are, I'm from the government, and I'm here to help.

But the Bible is clear. God calls us to obey governmental authority whether we trust it or not. The exception, and this is obvious, the exception is that, is when that authority tries to force us to disobey God or sin against God.

That happened to the early church leaders and they show us how we should respond when that happens. In Acts chapter 5, it says this, but Peter and the apostles answered, we must obey God rather than men.

Now, our government and healthcare leaders have overall acted responsibly as God's servants for your good during this pandemic.

[14:36] They have tried to stop its spread by not allowing any large group gatherings nationwide. Churches and Christians have not been singled out.

We, as individual Christians, as a church, we have not been targeted because of who we are or what we believe. Think about it. Christians have not been forbidden from practicing their faith. President Trump has issued at least two national days of prayer, you might say. Governor McMaster has begun most of his updates, his news conferences with a chaplain leading in prayer and many times ending his prayer in Jesus' name.

That's something to be thankful for. Churches have not been forbidden to preach the gospel. To the contrary, churches have been encouraged by government leaders, government McMaster, President Trump and others.

We have been encouraged to preach and teach, have your worship services online. WIFF.

[16:03] They posted on their website for several weeks a long list of churches and their websites where people could go and watch a worship service on Sunday or any other day.

That was commendable of WIFF. WIFF. Think about this. Local church Bible teaching, local church preaching has been more widely available through the internet during this crisis than ever before.

That's something that we need to just thank God for and thank the government leaders that we have who have done this. Now, I am well aware that there are liberal Democrat governors and mayors around this country that have done their best to prevent churches from doing what they lawfully should have done like having drive-in services.

The liberal Democrat governor of Illinois right now is not allowing churches to reopen unless they limit the size of their crowd to 50 or less.

I'm sure there are other mayors and leaders doing something similar right now. But so far, let's be honest, so far, these actions have been the exception, not the rule.

[17 : 39] And President Trump's Justice Department, under the leadership of Attorney General Barr, they have come to the defense of these churches.

They have stepped up and said, this is not right, this is not going to be allowed. They have defended our First Amendment rights to freely exercise our faith.

Those are leaders that we need to commend, we need to call attention to, we need to support, we need to pray for and thank God for. We must always be on guard against government overreach. We must always be on guard against the government intrusion led by today's liberal and socialist Democrats in Congress and liberal activist judges.

Always, we've got to guard against this. But in dealing with this pandemic, we as a church, along with thousands of churches across the country, we have done our duty by complying with our government's right call to stop all large group gatherings for a time to try to stop the spread of this deadly virus.

[19 : 05] Now that states are beginning to ease restrictions and allow larger groups to meet, businesses to open, it's right for churches to be among the first to resume.

But churches, we must be responsible. We must do this as safely and as wisely as we can. Now we have a plan here at Pickens for how we're going to resume.

A lot of the details have been explained in a letter that went out to the church this week from Gil Stewart and me. There's information in this week and last week's newsletter.

I want to encourage you to read this information. Be prepared to come next Sunday. Let's do church together in a safe way, in an orderly way, but in a good way that helps us worship the Lord.

Now there's a third reason that I want to quickly point out that explains why we haven't met for public worship for nine weeks. Look at this. We have shown wisdom by stopping our large group gatherings.

[20 : 17] You know, some people refer to the book of Proverbs as a manual on wisdom and it certainly is. Among the things that it emphasizes about wisdom, it emphasizes the importance of listening to people who are wise and knowledgeable.

For an example, look at this from Proverbs 23. Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge. You know, there's a lot that scientists and healthcare professionals do not know about the coronavirus.

But there are things they do know and we need to listen to them about those things. They know that the coronavirus is highly contagious and that it is potentially fatal to anyone but especially senior adults and people with underlying health problems.

They know that avoiding large group gatherings and practicing social distancing is an effective way to deal with it, to prevent it spread.

Therefore, I have no doubt that we have acted wisely in not having public services over these past few weeks, not having large group gatherings along with everyone else in our country.

[21 : 41] It's not what we wanted to do but it was a wise thing to do. You know, we have joined with other churches voluntarily throughout our country to comply with our government and health care leaders directives in order to try to protect lives, in order to try to save lives.

We've done that for the benefit of our church family and those we come in contact with outside this building. But more than that, we have sought to fulfill our God-given responsibility to love our neighbor as ourselves, to fulfill our Christian duty of obeying proper governmental authority and we have acted wisely to the best of our ability.

Now, the coronavirus is still a serious threat but we can't stop living life because it's present. Some liberals and socialists appear not to even care about destroying our economy and our nation.

But wise leaders do care and they are leading us to start rebuilding and reopening and for churches to regather.

Wise leaders are telling us we've got to be very, very careful. We've got to do this slowly. We've got to do this in steps. We've got to protect lives as we reopen the country.

[23 : 28] We're going to do our best as we regather next Sunday morning to be as careful and as safe as we possibly can. But I want to make this clear.

we cannot provide a germ-free environment. It will not be a germ-free building when you come on Sunday.

Therefore, if you are in the at-risk group for developing serious complications from the coronavirus, I want to encourage you to prayerfully and carefully evaluate whether or not you should come back

to church right now.

I think you ought to be very careful about going out in public and just going about your life as you used to right now. Know this for sure.

You will not be sinning against God if you wait a while longer to come back to church. You will not be doing anything wrong or cowardly if you don't just get out and about and pretend that all is well. [24 : 35] But for all who are planning to come, please practice social distancing and follow directions next Sunday.

We're trying to make our building as safe as possible for all of us. But once we get here next Sunday, once we get here and get focused together, let's forget about the coronavirus, the pandemic and all this.

Let's worship the Lord wholeheartedly together as the Pickens First Baptist family. I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to seeing you.

I hope if it's wise for you to get out, I hope to see you next Sunday morning, either at 8, 9, 30 or 11 as we join together to worship and praise our great God.

Let's pray together now. Father, Father, we pray that as we come together next Sunday morning, that you will help us to truly enjoy being in your presence, being with one another, and being the people of God at worship.

[26 : 02] Lord, we pray that you will keep us safe. We pray, Father, that you will enable us to act wisely and responsibly. We pray that for all churches.

And Lord, we pray that throughout our country, as more and more businesses open, that you'll keep us safe. We pray, Father, that we will not see a big jump in the number of coronavirus cases.

Lord, bring it to an end, we pray. And help us to restart our country. Help us to reopen businesses.

And help us, Father, to regather as your people.

And help us, Father, to live as your people. Loving you, loving others, in the best possible way. And it's in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.