

**“Responding to Rules at Church
That You Think Are Ridiculous in a Pandemic”**
June 7, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

Let’s pray...

[...]

We have heard from Elder Gross this evening about the plans for next Sunday morning. You have been hearing from me over several weeks about how we are responding to the current pandemic. But of course, the fact remains that there is a range of opinion within our congregation on where things stand and what the best way forward for us is.

And so, of course, there are those of you listening tonight who disagree with the direction we are taking – who have disagreed with me, with Ryan, with the session, with the committee.

And, of course, that’s okay. It’s okay to disagree with all of us. This isn’t the Nicene Creed we’re talking about. This isn’t the deity of Christ. We can disagree on the details and the wisdom of how we respond to this pandemic. That’s alright.

Maybe you look at our decisions, and the course we have taken, and you think we have been foolish – you think we have weighed the evidence and the risks badly, and so chosen a foolish way to respond to them.

Maybe you look at the course of action we’ve taken and you think we are cowardly. Maybe you’re ashamed at the lack of courage in our actions in the face of the virus before us.

Maybe you look at how we have been thinking about all of this and you think we have naively adopted a foolish framework for viewing things – whether that framework we’ve naively adopted came from the governor’s office, the medical establishment, the media elites, or somewhere else.

Maybe you look at the actions we’ve taken and you think we have taken responsibility onto ourselves that we should not have taken – we have decided to cancel gathered events, taking (within the purview of church events) the responsibility for other people’s health onto ourselves, when in your view we never should have taken on that responsibility, and we should have let each person decide what to do for themselves.

Let’s say you have read every update we have sent, and you have listened to every sermon on the pandemic that I have preached, and you have listened to Elder Gross’s words just now, and you have come to the conclusion that we are wrong, in one or more of those ways.

For the sake of this sermon, I’m going to assume that you are right.

In fact, for the sake of this sermon, let’s assume that you are correct in any and all of the possible objections I’ve listed so far.

Again – I don't think you are, but it certainly wouldn't be the first time I've been wrong about something. So, let's assume, for the remainder of this sermon, that you are right and I, and Elder Gross, and the session, are wrong.

Let's assume that we have been foolish in our analysis of the facts, cowardly in the way we have responded to the risks, foolish in the framework we have adopted to think the situation through, and unnecessarily paternalistic in the responsibilities we have taken on for the congregation.

If you think one or more of those things are true, and if we assume that you are right, what then should you do this coming Sunday morning?

That's the question I want us to consider together tonight.

You should note that it's a fairly narrow question. I'm not speaking to how you should respond to *every* situation where these disagreements exist. I'm limiting myself to this specific situation. Of course, the biblical principles we'll discuss tonight will apply (with the necessary changes being made) to some other situations – but not necessarily all other situations.

Tonight, I want to suggest what I believe the Scriptures call you to do, in the specific situation you find yourself in of disagreeing with the precautions we are taking here at Faith, and deciding what you will do next Sunday morning.

Now, I preach this sermon from the pulpit. And I preach it in a sincere effort to exposit the Word of God, and apply it to the situation we are considering together.

But I also realize that if you have disagreed strongly with how I have handled this situation so far, then I have probably lost a bit of credibility with you over the past two months. In many ways, that would seem unavoidable.

So, I put these thoughts forward as your pastor. I put them forward as what I think the Scriptures say. But more than that, regardless of *me*, I put them forward in an exhortation to look at the Scripture *yourself*, and to consider these passages *yourself*, and to diligently apply them in the week ahead *yourself*, as you decide what you will do this coming Sunday morning – June 14th, when we have our first outdoor services.

That is my goal for tonight.

Now, one more word on that goal. The majority of what I have to say tonight applies to all of us – whatever your position is on how we should proceed. When I say this sermon is especially for those who disagree with the approach the church has taken, I'm *not* saying that you need to be singled out for extra instruction because there's something extra wrong with you – I'm trying to do the opposite. I am trying to respect the fact that after all this has been said, you might still disagree. And I'm not going to just ignore you or tell you to shut up. No. I want to consider God's word with you on what your next steps might be as you seek to disagree with your session in a *Christian* way. I want to address this possibility because I *think* we're handling this right as a session ... but of course I can't *know* we're handling it right.

With all that said, here's what I want to consider tonight: I want to look at three groups of Scripture, I want to consider four possible courses of action for you on Sunday, June 14th, and I want again

to prayerfully exhort you to consider the Scriptures yourself as you decide what you will do next Sunday.

With that outline before us, let's proceed.

First, we come to three sets of Scripture texts.

The first set is two texts on how to handle ethical disagreements in the church: Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10.

Let's hear first from Romans fourteen – Paul writes:

^{14:1}As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

[...]

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

¹²So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

¹³Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Paul makes a similar point in First Corinthians chapters eight through ten, concluding at one point “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” [1 Cor. 8:13]

Now a lot of people have appealed to these texts in different situations, and sometimes in ways that are not that helpful. Sometimes it's implied that these verses require us to all do what other people think we should do, or that we all need to live in accord with the morals of the most scrupulous among us. But that is not Paul's point.

John Frame, in his book on ethics, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, helpfully points to three concepts at work in these passages. [p. 170-175]

The first is that when two groups in the church disagree over a matter of conscience, they must not despise or pass sinful judgement on one another.

This is the issue Paul points out in Romans 14:3 – the first group despises the second group, while the second group sinfully judges the first. Whatever your position is on how we should proceed regarding the coronavirus, this concept applies to you – it applies to you and to me, to the session, the deacons, the men, women, and children. *We must not despise or sinfully judge one another.*

Now, Paul says in this passage that one group in the dispute in Rome is right, and the other group is wrong. But if the group that is right despises their brothers who are wrong, then more is lost than if they had just been wrong in the first place.

Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it in First Corinthians 13:2: “If I [...] understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

If I am 100% right, but am not loving, I have nothing. That is the first point Paul makes in Romans 14 and a point we *all* need to consider. As we disagree, we must not despise one another – we must not sinfully judge one another.

Second, as we disagree, we must seek to lovingly educate one another’s consciences. This is a point that Frame makes that I think is often lost when we look at Romans 14. We sometimes read this as if we are just supposed to agree to disagree and leave it there. But that’s not what Paul is actually doing here. Paul is trying to educate the consciences of those he disagrees with, even as he is set on not pressuring them to *violate* their consciences. And the distinction is really important. Educating someone else’s conscience brings the Bible and wisdom to bear to try to help change their ethical opinion, and change their actions *after* they’ve changed their ethical opinion. Trying to get someone to violate their conscience is to pressure or tempt someone to do something they still think is wrong, *before* they’ve been convinced that it’s okay.

Paul is very much in favor of seeking to educate others’ consciences when he thinks they are wrong. He does it here. He does it throughout his letters and throughout his ministry. He expects the members of the disputing groups described here to do that as well.

And we too should do that, whatever our views on how we should proceed. We should bring Scripture, and wisdom, and other information to bear to try to persuade others as to why we think one course of action is morally better than another. And in humility, we should be willing to hear opposing perspectives, because we each know that our own conscience needs ongoing education – and we don’t know *where* we might be wrong, so we need to hear opposing views on a range of things.

This is the spirit that I – that we – have wanted to cultivate. It’s why we set up the email address for you to share your thoughts. It’s why we as a committee read every one of those emails that come in. I’m reading every email I personally receive on this issue – I tend to run behind in responding, and I might not have time to give everyone a point-by-point response to the personal emails I receive on these issues, but I read and I think about every one of them. You are trying to educate my conscience, and I want to be open to that. And my hope is that you too will be open to us seeking to educate your conscience. That is the goal of the sermon series I have preached in the evenings over the past couple months. Imperfect as those sermons may be, that has been my goal. That is the goal of the communications from the session and the committee. That is the goal of the email address whereby we can hear from you. We need to keep that conversation open and ongoing.

Now, that doesn't mean we'll convince one another. And when we have a dialogue, and we still don't agree, then we need to remember that first point, and we need to resist the temptation to despise or sinfully judge one another. But all of us need to be open to hearing.

So, we all need to love rather than despise one another. We all need to lovingly seek to educate the conscience of those we disagree with, while being open to their attempts to educate us. Those two points apply in the same ways to everyone.

But the third principle that John Frame points out that is operating in Paul's thought in Romans 14, while it applies to everyone, will work itself out in uneven ways.

The last main point behind Paul's words here is that we should not violate our own conscience *or* tempt or pressure others to violate their conscience.

Let me say that again: We should not violate our own conscience *or* tempt or pressure others to violate their conscience.

And the way that plays out is different for the two sides of this ethical disagreement in Romans 14 and First Corinthians 8-10.

Because Paul doesn't tell each person to do what the other group wants. He doesn't urge those who think eating food sacrificed to idols is a sin to eat that food anyway when they are with those who think it is fine ... but he *does* call on those who think eating it is fine to refrain from eating it in a way that pressures or tempts those who think it is wrong.

Why the difference?

Because one would lead to a violation of conscience and the other would not.

The picture of what Paul is concerned about that emerges here is of one person, who thinks eating food sacrificed to idols is okay, pressuring or tempting a second person to do the same thing, even though the second person thinks it is wrong. The first person might be inviting the second person over and serving them meat sacrificed to idols and pressuring them – in overt or in subtle ways – to eat the meat, all while they know the second person thinks that to do so would be wrong.

Paul says that one who does what they think is wrong has sinned – even if they are wrong in thinking the thing is wrong. And God's people are therefore not to pressure their brothers or sisters to do things that their brothers or sisters think would be wrong.

So one who eats meat sacrificed to idols – even though it is not a sin in itself – they should not tempt or pressure those who *do* think it is a sin to eat. That includes not putting any social pressure on them to do it.

That doesn't mean that those who think it is okay to eat meat can never eat it. It doesn't even mean that there might not be situations where it is okay for them to eat it before those who disagree with them. What Paul has in mind are situations that would pressure or tempt others to do what they think is wrong.

We might think of a parallel with a teetotaler who abstains from alcohol on moral grounds. Some are firm in their conviction and will tell you they don't mind if you have a glass of wine in front of them – they feel no pressure or temptation from that. But others would feel pressure or temptation to have a drink with you. You'd have to handle those situations differently.

But the application is still uneven. The concept, remember, is that we should not violate our own conscience *or* tempt or pressure others to violate their consciences.

And the application Paul gives here can be done without anyone violating their conscience or being pressured to violate their conscience. But the reverse is not true. The reverse would require some to violate their conscience.

If one person refrains from meat around a weaker brother for the weaker brother's sake, he doesn't think he's sinned. But if the weaker brother eats meat sacrificed to idols for his brother's sake, he *does* think he's sinned.

Paul does not ask them to do that – he actually commands them not to do that, for to do that is to violate their conscience, and thus to sin – even if their conscience is in error.

And I think all of this applies to our own situation as well.

As far as I am aware, wearing a medical mask and keeping socially distanced does not violate anyone's conscience. I am not aware of any Christians arguing that they must have their nose and mouth uncovered when in worship, or it is a sin. I am not aware of anyone who believes they must stand close to others on a Sunday or it is a sin.

As far as I am aware, if one who believes these rules are unnecessary abides by them anyway, he does not think he has sinned.

But there are those of us in our congregation who believe that violating these rules of masking and social distancing at this particular moment *would* be a sin – that it would be a real failure to take every step we should to care for the life of other people, and so a sin. Let's think about that for a moment.

First, those who are more concerned and who *want* us to take a more cautious approach *do* exist in our congregation. It's been an interesting thing for me to observe. Within our congregation, those who are more vocal are almost exclusively those who think the current cautions are unnecessary. But I've also received emails from multiple households privately expressing their appreciation for our caution.

Now, I don't know what the overall breakdown of our congregation is – I've only heard from a fraction at each end. But my point is that more people exist in our congregation who are concerned and who think these precautions are important than show up on your Facebook newsfeed.

And those who are concerned in many cases have moral grounds for their decision to practice distancing. They believe that this virus threatens people's lives – whether they are right or wrong about that, that is what they believe. And they believe that failing to take necessary precautions puts people's lives at risk.

And you should consider the range of people they are thinking about in their concern. Maybe they are worried about being a carrier who gets you sick. Your permission may not be enough to overcome that moral concern, because if you got sick from them, they'd still feel responsible.

Others may be less worried about you than someone else they plan to visit this week now that we are in phase two. Maybe they have an elderly family member they want to visit. They are being cautious for themselves so they can visit that person without being a vector of the virus to them. If you come up without a mask and give them a hug, then suddenly they have been exposed to you (remember – their mask protects you; it's your mask that's supposed to protect them). Maybe they smile and walk away, but now the question sits with them. They were supposed to visit that other person later this week. They were trying to exercise caution with others, so as to love that elderly family member by keeping the risk as low as possible for being a vector of the virus. Now what do they do? They may find themselves in a morally or emotionally distressing dilemma. This is the situation you put them in if you *assume* they won't mind you ignoring the precautions or if you pressure them to break precautions that they don't want to break. Even if you are right that the virus is not a real threat, you can put them into this moral, spiritual, and emotional dilemma.

It's also possible that they are concerned for their own health. And we should stress that that is *not* a sin. We as Christians are called on not to fear death, but trust that Christ has overcome death for us. We as Christians are called to value certain other things over our own life – so much so that we would sacrifice our lives for certain things, in a Christ-like way. But we are not called on to be reckless with our lives. And whether they are correct or incorrect in how they gauge the level of risk, some of your brothers and sisters in this congregation believe they would be sinfully reckless with their own lives that God has entrusted them with, if they do not take all the recommended precautions on Sunday morning.

That's not necessarily a sign of cowardice, as some have claimed, but can be a sense of responsibility and concern about being good stewards of what God has given them. In their minds it may be the same moral rationale that leads them to buckle a seatbelt.

But if you pressure or tempt that person to be closer than six feet to you, or to be near you when you aren't wearing a mask, you may be tempting or pressuring them to do something they believe is sinfully reckless. You may be pressuring them to violate their conscience, and so to sin.

I encourage you to consider how all of this applies. But from my viewpoint it means that even if you are right in your perspective that the virus is not a real risk, you must not openly or subtly pressure those who think it *is* a real risk to break social distancing with you or be around you when you are not wearing a mask.

That means that you don't assume someone is okay discarding those precautions when you know they may not be. It means you don't pressure others to break precautions or mock those who want to follow precautions.

Now, once again, this doesn't mean that the most scrupulous side wins and the other side just needs to shut up. First, this point only applies to situations like Sunday morning when you will be around those who hold those views. Second, we need to remember the first two concepts we already identified. *Neither side* of the disagreement is supposed to despise the other, and both sides are called to try to educate the conscience of the other. You can continue to explain why you think masks and distancing are a mistake. But you do that while standing six feet away and wearing a

mask – just as the Christians in Rome, who *rightly* knew that abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols was unnecessary, were to aim to convince their Christian brothers and sisters of that fact over a meal of vegetables.

That, it seems to me, is the application of this passage.

I encourage each of you – whatever your perspective on all this is – to sit with these texts this week. Pray about them. Reflect on them. Ask the Lord to help you apply them to yourself.

I have been thinking about them this past week, and I plan to continue to think about them in the week ahead.

That is our first group of texts. And it leads to our second group of texts.

Because some will rightly ask: Well, aren't there *some times* when we need to defy those whose consciences are overly restricted?

And the answer is yes – we see it in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. We see it in how he handles circumcision for those he works with.

Let me explain what I mean.

We get an interesting case study of this in how the Apostle Paul handles circumcision in the case of Timothy versus in the case of Titus.

In Acts chapter fifteen, the Jerusalem council determines that Gentile converts do not need to be circumcised to be full Christians.

We read of that official verdict in Acts chapter fifteen. And then, in the very next chapter, we read of Paul recruiting a minister to work with him on his missionary journeys. And we read in Acts 16:3, “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places.” Now ... it's confusing to read that right after the council determined that circumcision was not necessary.

And it gets even more confusing when we read in Galatians chapter two that in another case, when the Apostle Paul took Titus with him, Paul refused to circumcise Titus. [Gal. 2:3-5]

Why the difference? What is going on here?

R. C. Sproul addresses this question, and the answer is instructive. Sproul points out that in the case of Timothy, Paul saw the Jews he was ministering to as weaker brothers. Timothy being uncircumcised was a stumbling block to them. And, in order to not put pressure on them regarding their conscience, Paul and Timothy decided that Timothy would be circumcised before going to minister among them. Of course, even as they did that, we know that Paul's message included the fact that circumcision was unnecessary. But Timothy would now preach that to them while being circumcised.

But a few years later the debate over circumcision had moved beyond the confusion and discomfort of some Jews and had come to the point where some in positions of power were claiming that

circumcision really was necessary to be saved. That position, Paul saw, was a denial of the gospel. And once that was the case, Paul refused to accommodate it with Titus. [Sproul]

In fact, Paul says in his letter to the Galatians that though some pressed hard for Titus to be circumcised, Paul writes: “To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” [Gal. 2:5]

When a scruple is no longer an ethical disagreement, but when one party says that their misplaced scruple is required by God for salvation, then defiance of the scruple is often the right response.

And so, if the session comes out with a statement that says that wearing masks and staying six feet away from others is a necessary ritual for salvation, then you may indeed be called on to violate our conscience just as Paul was called to violate the consciences of the Judaizers.

But that’s not what we’re saying. We are saying that we believe following these guidelines are our moral obligation in this particular situation. If you are right, and we are wrong, then it seems to me that our situation is much more like the case of Timothy than the case of Titus. That’s how I read it, at least.

Of course, some will point out that there are other cases where we are called to defy the ethical scruples or demands of others. And that’s true.

It’s true of course in cases where we, by complying, will deny the gospel. It’s true in cases where we are asked to sin. It’s true in cases of an emergency, where following someone’s scruple would put someone unnecessarily at risk for harm. It’s true also if there is a contradiction between two things you are asked to do or required to do by two different authorities – those situations are more complex. And Christian ethics have dealt with all these kinds of situations and the wisdom needed to navigate them. [Frame, 618-619] But as I have thought those through this week, none of them appear to me to apply to this particular situation.

And it might be helpful to say that, even if one of them applies in one sphere, that doesn’t mean it applies in another. Some have focused on constitutional questions as our governor has made certain proclamations. But that is a different area than the church. We are not putting these rules in place for Sunday as an extension of the governor’s office. We are asking you to follow these precautions as your church leaders out of Christian love. It’s possible to conclude that your government has no constitutional right to require something of you, but that Christian love compels you to give that same thing to your fellow Christians. And we all know that. We can passionately defend our constitutional right to freedom of speech while also acknowledging that our spouse has a right to expect certain kinds of speech from us out of Christian love, and our Church expects we speak of one another in a certain way out of Christian love.

I would say that the same is true here. How you view the government is beside the point in many ways – the question is how you relate to your brothers and sisters in this congregation.

There are situations in which we can and should scandalize others, because not to do so would deny the gospel of Christ.

This doesn’t seem, to me at least, to be one of those situations.

We may not like the request and requirement to wear masks and socially distance in a worship service. But neither the Apostle Paul, nor the Scriptures as a whole, nor the Christian tradition, have made that a deciding principle for how we act.

Which brings us to the last text I want to consider this evening.

In John chapter thirteen, Jesus says to his disciples, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

And for all of us, on every side of this issue, this is key.

Before one another, before our children, before any outsiders who might be looking on, our love for one another, even as we disagree, will be a testimony for or against our Lord.

And as the Apostle Paul reminds us, love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy or boast, love is not arrogant or rude, love does not insist on its own way, love is not irritable or resentful.

We are called, brothers and sisters, to love one another. That is not easy sometimes. But as we love one another for Christ’s sake, we will bear witness by our actions to who Christ is, and to the fact that we are his people.

On one level I think the devil is a lot less concerned about who is right and who is wrong about the risk level of the coronavirus, than he is about whether he can get us to sin against one another in the midst of the confusion and uncertainty. If we are acting in unloving ways towards one another, I’m not sure the devil cares that much whether we are right or wrong about how dangerous this virus is.

As we think of all these texts, and as we think of the biblical principles found in them, let’s consider what your options are for June 14th if you disagree with the session’s decision to take the precautions we are taking. Those precautions, again, are:

- Holding the service outdoors
- Requiring social distancing between households
- Requiring mask-wearing for all who attend (with a few exceptions for the very young)
- Requiring self-screening for any COVID-like symptoms, and
- Encouraging hand-washing

If you disagree with those precautions, as I see it, you have four basic options.

One is to come to the service and to follow the precautions we have laid out, even though you think they are unnecessary. You might voice your disagreements to us or you might not, but either way you could still come and follow those precautions out of love for those who are more concerned than you are – even if those people are wrong.

A second option is stay home and worship with the livestream as you have been. That of course is a valid option, and many will continue doing that not because they think our service is too cautious, but because they think that for them our service is not cautious enough.

A third option is to go to another church that will not require the same precautions. I mention this one not because I like this possibility (I do not), but I mention it because I know that some are considering it, and some have already begun to do this. So I'm not going to pretend that this option does not exist, or that some of you aren't thinking about it.

A fourth option is to come to the service, and to break the rules and precautions we have laid out.

My hope is that if you are comfortable, and if your health allows you to, then you will be willing to take the first option – to come and follow the precautions even as you disagree with them.

If you cannot do that for one reason or another, I hope you will consider the second option – to continue to worship with the livestream at home until you are comfortable joining us in person.

I am saddened by the idea of congregants leaving our community over the precautions we have taken. But this isn't the place for me to speak to that – that's a whole other topic. If you are considering that, I do hope you will engage with us to talk through it. But I recognize that you will do what you think is best in the end.

What I really want to urge you against tonight is the fourth option: Coming on Sunday the 14th, and causing a disruption in our worship service by violating the precautions we are taking, and asking you to take.

I understand you may disagree with us.

But I am asking you not to put others in the position of violating their own conscience by violating the precautions they were assured would be in place.

I'm asking you not to disrupt what should be a time of worship, by defying the precautions we've communicated to you beforehand, and which you knew you would be expected to follow if you came.

I'm asking you not to put us – to put me or the session – in a position of having to respond to you in that setting.

I know slip-ups will happen – I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking about perfection. I'm talking about everyone making a sincere effort to follow the precautions, whether we agree with them or not, and doing it out of love for one another.

With that said, my exhortation for all of us is that we each consider these texts in the week ahead, and ask how we can love one another well next Sunday morning.

I'm friends with pastors across the country. So I know how the stages of reopening have gone in other churches and I have heard what can go wrong.

I talked recently with a pastor whose church had just held their first outdoor service. One group who came overtly broke the distancing requirements. Another group, who had been so excited to be with God's people again, was distressed that people were brushing aside the precautions, and so many of them felt unsafe, and left before the service began. Some left in tears. It sounded like

they wouldn't be back for a while after that, because now they expected that when they did come, they would be pressured to violate their conscience.

The minister and staff of the church had to have some uncomfortable conversations right there on the spot to reestablish the rules, but by the time they did the whole service was disrupted, and a number of people were upset or hurt by what had happened.

Over the following week the ministers had to spend hours communicating with others, confronting those who had violated the precautions, trying to repair the damage with congregants who felt hurt or misled about how the service would work, and generally settling everyone down after what had happened.

Brothers and sisters, I don't want that to be us.

Let's approach this – all of us – set on loving others as best we can in the midst of this difficult season.

Everyone is stressed. Everyone is strained. Let's not take it out on one another.

Let's fight hard against the temptation to judge or despise our brothers and sisters whom we disagree with.

Let's try to educate one another's conscience not with an arrogant and quarrelsome attitude, but with a humble and loving spirit.

Let's all be dedicated to whatever course of action will keep us from violating our conscience, and that will not pressure anyone else to violate theirs – so that our time of gathered worship will be especially pleasing to God.

Let's all be committed to sacrificially loving one another, sacrificing our rights for the good of others, as Christ has done for us.

Let's all think and pray and study the Scriptures about the best ways for us to each do that on the 14th.

I have missed you all a great deal. I am so looking forward to seeing many of you just a week from today.

I will be praying that when we gather next Lord's Day – some together outside, some online and at home – that it will be a time of love and joy for all who are involved.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Frame, John. *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008.

Sproul, R.C. "In Acts 16 Paul Encourages Timothy To Be Circumcised, Then Later Condemns It. Was He Being Hypocritical?" Ligonier.org. Taken from *Now, That's a Good Question!* Copyright © 1996 by R.C. Sproul. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/acts-16-paul-encourages-timothy-be-circumcised-the/>