

A Plea For Love in the Midst of Ever Increasing Polarization

To the church of God at Olympic Free Church, “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2–3). *We are truly thankful to God for every single one of you and have been praying for you throughout this difficult and increasingly divisive season of COVID-19.* And the single prayer we have prayed the most is this:

“That your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9–11).

We are praying this over you because we know that your lives have been turned completely upside-down. We know that leading doctors disagree about the best approach. We are aware that our government is not taking an evenhanded approach to policy. We know that everyone is ready to return to a “normal life.” And we know that the media is trying to drive every single one of us to one end of the spectrum or the other. But, most of all we are praying this because our behavior as Christians during this time is not ultimately about us—God’s glory is at stake. Remember Paul’s exhortation in Colossians three:

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)

We are writing this letter to you today to formally ask everyone in the church to abide by the Sunday morning COVID protocols we instituted back in June (i.e., attendees over 2-years old need to wear a face covering / acrylic face shield while in the building). And our motivation is simply this: love for all of our members. From the beginning we have known that mask-wearing was a polarizing issue. Therefore, we did not ask our ushers and greeters to force compliance. We were hoping that for the sake of love and deference to one another in Christ that you would comply.

But, it has recently come to our attention that some of our members in the “at-risk” category have stopped coming to Sunday worship because an ever-increasing number of people are not wearing masks. These people really want to attend Sunday worship and really want to fellowship with us before and after the service, but they are truly concerned about contracting COVID.

These brothers and sisters in Christ are not blind sheep, they are not cowering in fear, nor are they ignoring the 99% recovery rate—they have been coming to church since June. Rather, they are taking reasonable precautions in light of the fact that an infection can be utterly devastating for older and at-risk individuals.

Yes, we are all tired of wearing masks—yes, your elders and pastors are tired of it as well. But, the truth of the matter is that virtually every one of us is already submitting to mask requirements in some capacity whether that be at work, the doctor’s office, the bank, the hair salon, etc.

Yet, when it comes to the body of Christ, God's Word is very clear that the exercise of our rights—yes, our rightful rights—can have a detrimental impact on our brothers and sisters in Christ. And it is in this spirit, and this spirit alone, that we implore you to comply.

- **Romans 14:13; 15** Therefore 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... *For 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.
- **1 Corinthians 8:9; 13** But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak... *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*
- **Philippians 2:1–4** So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.* ⁴*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

Please recognize the meager limits of what your elders are asking AND the lengths that we have gone to accommodate those who are extremely opposed to masks/shields.

- **The Limits:** We are not asking you to change your personal convictions about masks and we are not pressing for compliance in the public square. We are only asking for a period of about 1.5 hours on Sunday mornings and we are asking for it in the pursuit of love and unity among the entire church.
- **The Lengths:** We have already waived some of the mask-wearing protocols for E4M on Wednesday nights because parents were opposed—and this adjustment was not an easy decision. Yet, even in this we tried to make it clear in an email on September 8th that, “These guidelines will apply only to Wednesday night E4M. *Sunday morning protocol will remain in place because we know that some of our people would not feel comfortable attending if we stop asking the congregation to wear masks.*”

We love you all dearly and we are praying for you consistently by name in all of our meetings. And it is our prayer that you will not only see the true depths of our struggle for you all in this controversial time, but that “our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess 1:11–12).

May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.

Pastor Mark and the Elders.