

Jason Upchurch - A Christian Response to Vaccine Mandates

Turn this morning to **Matthew 10:16**.

I was talking with a pastor friend late last week and we were both talking about how the latest vaccine mandates were affecting people in our congregation. Both of us are committed to expository preaching, but at some point there are issues that are so pressing on us as believers we need to stop and address them. I believe the vaccine mandates are one of those issues.

This is not an effort to be political in any way. The vaccine mandates that are being issued have the ability to affect virtually every household in our church as well as countless friends and families we know. At this point we really need to know what faithfulness is as believers.

Most of you probably remember last January and February I was very optimistic about where we were headed with all of this. Case rates were falling, the vaccine was getting rolled out, it seemed like the worst was behind us.

Sadly, that is certainly not the case. As of Monday Aug 23rd, the 7 day average of Covid-positive test is almost where it was back in December at the peak. The death rate has not matched the same levels at this point, and I don't believe it will. But mask mandates have returned and vaccine mandates for employees are here.

Obviously this is a very polarizing issue. I saw a meme going around Facebook that says "I support mandatory vacations." And most people had misread the word - including me! The first time I saw it I thought "what are you thinking?" And then I realized I had misread the meme and so did basically everyone in the comments. The comment thread was like WW3.

How do we handle all of this as believers? Specifically vaccine mandates? Before we get into specifics, I want to look at what Jesus says here in **Matthew 10** to set the tone for our discussion.

Here in **Matthew 10** Jesus is sending out his disciples to go preach the good news that he is the Messiah. Jesus is the long awaited Christ and his Kingdom is here. And Jesus is giving instruction on what they should expect. In **Vss. 5-15** he gives instructions about how the disciples are to conduct themselves as they go through Israel. Cast out demons, take just 1 tunic, don't take extra food.

In **Vss. 16** and following he seems to switch gears and look past his earthy ministry because Jesus talks about the conduct of the disciples when they are standing in front of kings and governors which only happened after his death, resurrection and ascension.

All that to say in **Vss. 16** and following he's talking to his followers who live after the ascension. He's talking to **us**. He's telling us how to live in the world as believers. **Read 16-25**

So in **Vs. 16** Jesus says to understand the Christian life this side of the resurrection and ascension we need live knowing 4 animals.

Jesus sends us out into the world as what? Sheep. Sheep pose no threat to anyone. They are harmless and frankly, unintelligent creatures who are dependent upon a shepherd to watch over them and take care of them. Nobody fears sheep. And in the same way, no one should fear Christians. No one should worry about harm from us. Jesus specifically sends us out with this posture.

And he sends us out into the world that's filled with what? Wolves. Wolves throughout the Bible are categorically bad. They are ferocious and deadly. They devour sheep. In fact, many times they don't even eat the sheep, they just shred them. Jesus knows this as he sends us into the world.

He doesn't say "I send you out like Grizzly bears among wolves." It's not that we are to dominate our oppressors. It's not that we take vengeance on them. Vengeance belongs to who? The Lord. Jesus says I send you out as sheep among wolves.

This is the mission of believers as we account for our actions and our Lord. And yet we are called to go into the world and preach the gospel and the gospel has success in all the world and the gates of hell can't stop it. This is the crazy thing: Jesus's Kingdom is different than every other Kingdom that's ever been. And in Jesus's upside down Kingdom the sheep actually prevail over the wolves even though we are often slaughtered by them.

How do we prevail? He tells us how by mentioning two other animals. First, we prevail by being as shrewd as what? Serpents. That's actually the exact wording from the Garden of Eden. The ESV says "wise," but that's not quite the right word. In the Greek version of the OT uses this very word to say that the Serpent was more crafty than any other creature in the Garden.

It's craftiness, shrewdness that Jesus is commending here. Now, it's a little odd that Jesus would say "Hey be like Satan in the Garden." He's not saying be like Satan in sinfulness. He's saying be shrewd and craftiness.

What is shrewdness? We don't use that word much. It basically means to be street smart. It's knowing how to survive in difficult situations. It's practical cleverness and there's at least one other time Jesus commended shrewdness.

Remember in **Luke 16** when he gives the parable of the dishonest manager. Remember that? A manager had been accused of wasting the master's estate and was going to be audited. So the manager decided to settle account with the master's debtors. One guy owed the master 100 measures of oil, he said pay me 50 and we're square. Another guy owed 100 measures of wheat, he said pay me 80 and we're square. He did this so that when he got fired, those people would be his friends and help him out later.

Now, the parable is weird because it feels a little like Jesus is saying "Steal from your boss to make friends." He's not saying that. He's saying be street smart with the money God has given you for the Kingdom. Be shrewd.

Shrewdness - street smarts - are a good thing. And the serpent is the iconic animal for shrewdness. Serpents have a knack for self-preservation. They generally avoid being detected by humans. They are quiet, stealthy, cunning, patient. That's what Jesus seems to be getting at here.

As Christians we need to be street smart. We need to be shrewd in how we deal with the world. We can't be naive. It also doesn't do any good complaining that the world is filled with wolves. The wolves will always be there. We have to learn to live in the midst of them.

Now, just a side note: usually when we think of serpents and snakes we think of venom and harm. Jesus isn't saying to harm anyone, but to be smart in preserving yourself. How do we know that? Because the last animal rounds out our existence: Shrewd as serpents, gentle as what? Doves.

So whatever qualities that might be frightening about serpents are eliminated because we are to be like doves. Doves, like sheep, are gentle and no threat to anyone. But more importantly, in the ancient world doves were considered pure and holy. The Holy Spirit comes down in the form of what bird? A dove. A dove could be used as an offering to God because it was clean and holy.

You get the idea. This is how we know that Jesus isn't encouraging us to sinful or shady behavior with shrewdness because it's paired with innocence, purity and holiness like a dove. God's people are holy people, we are pure people.

It's easy to want to retaliate in sinful ways to the sinful world. That's not an option for us. Leon Morris says we need to be careful and clever when confronted with difficult situations, but never sinful (Commentary on Matthew).

Jesus says that if we follow these basic principles we don't even need to prepare what we're going to say when we stand before people and give an account of our faith. God will guide us in that moment. We don't

need a clever response. We don't need a response that will shut up the crowd. We don't need some lasting "One small step for mankind" kind of one-liner. God will guide us in those moments.

So this is the foundation of what I want to encourage us with this morning as we talk about vaccines. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, we are to be gentle in the midst of the world and yet wise and holy. The way we survive is to be street smart as serpents and holy as doves. That's the only way.

It's with that foundation I want to spend the rest of our time talking about vaccine mandates. Because we need to be sober minded as we consider how to move forward.

These mandates and exemptions are also changing almost daily. The State of Washington has seems to go back and forth every other day - and I imagine some things will change as unions are beginning to sue Gov. Inslee over these mandates.

The Biden administration seems to continue to expand who needs to be vaccinated to receive federal money. It's a moving target which means we need all the more to be street smart as we consider these things.

Before we jump in I know some of you have been vaccinated, others have not. Christians will differ in their view of vaccines and vaccine mandates and in light of those differences we need to show grace to one another. Last year when there were mask mandates, we simply left it up to the conscience of each individual person. You want to wear a mask? Wear a mask. You don't want to wear a mask? Don't wear a mask. We will still love each other and treat each other with respect.

The same thing is true with vaccines and vaccine mandates. Some of you have been vaccinated, other have not. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone; not faith in Jesus plus vaccination. Or faith in Jesus plus never getting vaccinated. So we are called to respect each other and love each other and show grace.

1) Vaccine mandates: why are we even talking about this?

Most state and federal employees are mandated to be fully vaccinated as a condition of their continued employment. For WA state schools, the deadline to be fully vaccinated is mid October which means a person would need to start the process sooner to get booth shots. Spokane city employees have until the end of the month.

Federal employees will be required to have the vaccine. Federal contractors - those who the government hires - will be required. Nursing homes that that receive federal benefits such as Medicare and medicaid will need to require their employees to be vaccinated. Colleges that receive federal Pell grants and other federal money will require their staff and students as well to be vaccinated.

SCC sent out a letter saying that online students - students who don't even attend class in person - would need to be vaccinated to enroll. That's pretty heavy handed.

Depending on how far the state and federal government wants to take this, almost every business will need to vaccinate as a stipulation of operating in accord with the health department. This is sort of Orwellian in its scope.

State and federal agencies have also placed pressure on private businesses to mandate vaccination as a term of employment.

This is the environment we're facing. And it doesn't seem to be getting any better. We have the Delta variant raging and there will be subsequent variants that will require booster vaccinations.

Now, I also believe that there are growing pockets of resistance. Along with vaccine mandates, there have been new mask mandates. Most of the stores I've gone to are refusing to enforce the newer mask mandates and I imagine they won't even attempt to enforce vaccine mandates.

2) Vaccine:

1 - There is nothing intrinsically evil about many vaccines. Vaccines are created in a variety of ways. Sometimes they use a dead virus or what is called an attenuated virus in the body to trigger our immune system. The newer vaccines use a different technology to trigger different immune responses. These technologies are not inherently evil. In fact, it's a rather brilliant way to protect us against many diseases. There is no Bible passage Christians can claim that rules out vaccine technology all together. We need to be clear on that.

Some religions, like JW's, believe you cannot take vaccines or have blood transfusions. The Bible nowhere forbids those things.

I do think it's fair that we can be wary of new medical technologies until they have a proven track record.

2 - Usually with vaccines there are several objections. One is that they are created with heavy metals and other ingredients that are typically considered toxic to the body. And to some extent they are. Many of the chemicals used are how they lessen the impact of the virus or keep the virus from propagating so we can build an immune response. Other chemicals simply preserve the vaccine for months from the date of manufacture.

The biggest objection I have to many vaccines is that they are created using tissue from aborted babies. Either the virus is taken from aborted babies, or the vaccine is grown on tissue from aborted babies.

Rubella, Rabies, Shingles, Smallpox, Chickenpox, and others have all been created with aborted babies somewhere in the process. Either in the collection, manufacture or testing of the vaccine. The COVID 19 vaccines are no exception. Sadly, they didn't have to do this. They could have made ethical vaccines that did not use aborted fetal tissue. But they chose to do so anyway.

Now, let me say: Christians are going to disagree over whether or not it's right to take a vaccine based on these factors. We spent a fair amount of time talking about the ethics of vaccines during Sunday School earlier this year. Christians will disagree over what level of complicity we have for taking a vaccine that incorporates aborted fetal tissue in the process.

But I think it's legitimate to object to a vaccine based on the use of aborted fetal tissue alone. I want you to understand that I am not anti-vaccine across the board. I think vaccine science is pretty amazing. But we need to understand there are ethical issues within the medical research community that are very concerning and might preclude us from participating.

3) Problems with the Covid vaccine:

Why not just take the vaccine? We have helmet laws, schools already have a mandatory vaccine schedule. Why not just get this one so we can get on with our lives?

The vaccine is not as helpful as we were led to believe. I believe that it works - to some extent - but not how it was billed.

First of all, if you look at the historical data from just this year, the number of cases of Covid had dropped 75% before the vaccine was even rolled out. Everyone assumes that the drop in cases this spring was because of the vaccine. If you look at the historical numbers from the CDC right next to the historical numbers of vaccinations, the cases had already dropped significantly prior to the vaccine coming out.

That's not to say the vaccine is worthless, it is to say that the return to normalcy we were feeling this spring and early summer was not actually due to the vaccine itself. I think it's due to the epidemiological cycle of viruses.

We were initially told once we reached herd immunity - something like 60-70% of people vaccinated - we could return to normal life. That hasn't proven to be the case. And now there is basically vaccine shaming happening toward those who are hesitant to get vaccinated or who object based on religious reasons.

We were told the vaccine would prevent those who are vaccinated from getting the virus. That hasn't been the case. And neither has it kept people from getting the variants. It does seem that the vaccines lessen the impact of the virus - those who are vaccinated usually have an easier go with the virus.

Because of breakthrough infections and the fact that the virus is mutating, we're also staring down an endless cycle of booster shots to keep up.

We were also told that those vaccinated wouldn't be able to spread the virus. It turns out vaccinated people can still carry the full viral load and pass it to others. Again, we were told this wouldn't happen. We were told that the point of herd immunity is not just protect ourselves, but to protect those who can't get vaccinated because their immune systems are compromised or weak.

But the reality is that benefit is not true with this vaccine. Those who are vaccinated can get the disease and pass the disease. There's no broad community benefit from vaccination.

I mention that because one of the arguments from many people - Christians included - to wear a mask or get vaccinated - is that this is how we love our neighbors. We get vaccinated to protect **them**. But it turns out that benefit doesn't exist.

So where we're at is that jobs are being threatened over getting a vaccine that has very limited effectiveness and is manufactured in unethical ways. I'm not saying the vaccine doesn't work at all. But there's a reason the CDC is saying you need to still socially distance and wear a mask even if you've been vaccinated.

4) Which leads us to Exemptions:

There have been vaccine mandates for some time. There have also been exemptions to those mandates as well.

Historically there have been 3 ways to be exempt from a vaccine: 1) Medical exemption 2) Religious exemption 3) Philosophical exemption.

Medical exemptions are usually given by a doctor for small children, those that have compromised immune systems or those that have had bad reactions to vaccines in the past.

The philosophical exemption has been basically gutted in recent years mostly because the government realized people used it as an "I just don't want to get the vaccine" argument. They really had no philosophy behind their objection.

Now, let me pause here and say that it's awfully tough for the state to determine the difference between a philosophical objection and a religious objection. As Christians we probably have an idea, but how does the state determine that? Or how does some guy in Human Resources you've never met determine whether or not your objection is religious or philosophical? I think we're on dangerous ground trying to separate those too much.

The religious exemption is the one we're concerned about. This comes into play because government generally has allowed for religious exemptions vaccines. Why does the government matter? Because it's the government, more than any other institution, that has driven the mandate for vaccination.

The government exists for the health, safety and welfare of the people and mass vaccination to reach herd immunity is - on the surface, all things being equal - an obvious way to ensure the health of the people.

There are religious exemptions available right now for the vaccines and I think it's fine to claim a religious exemption.

Before you claim a religious exemption, I think your first step is to make sure you in fact have a religious reason to seek an exemption.

If you're on social media you know some people are just lazy or they're into conspiracy theories. And they want to claim religious exemption because it's an easy out.

For Christians, we can't do that because that wouldn't be honest. What are some reasons from the Bible? I mentioned earlier that the use of aborted fetal cells is reason enough - at least for me - to not get the vaccine.

Having a clear conscience is also a reason to not get something.

Rom. 14:23: For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

That is, if after investigating and looking into the data you cannot take the vaccine in faith, it's sin. This is where Christians might differ in their view of whether or not to take the vaccine.

But what you put into your body and why is an important issue in the Christian faith. The world might not understand the role of the conscience in our walk with the Lord. They don't have to; we answer to the Lord.

So what about the exemptions? I typically encourage people to say as little as possible to get an exemption for 2 reasons. First, as American citizens we should not have to grieve an answer for our religious beliefs - we can exercise them freely.

Second, I encourage people to say very little because the more we say the more targeted we will be.

Here are the questions for school employees:

1. Describe the religious belief, practice, or observance that is the basis for your request for a religious accommodation.
2. Does your religious belief, practice, or observance lead you to object to: A) All medical treatment B) All vaccinations C) vaccination. Only the Covid 19
3. Briefly explain how your sincerely held religious belief, practice or observance conflicts with the Covid 19 vaccination requirement.
4. Briefly describe the accommodation you are requesting.
5. If the request for accommodation is temporary, please identify the anticipated date the accommodation is no longer needed.

And the idea is that you fill these out and some person in HR is able to discern whether or not you're being honest about whether you sincerely believe these things.

To quote a line from Star Wars: It's a trap! These are all gotchya questions.

As Christians, we might consider giving all the reasons we object, but those probably won't matter. If we have an objection based simply on conscience the world will think that's foolish. If we have an objection based on aborted fetal cells the world will think that's foolish.

My advice might change, but at this point I've told people to simply put "I will not take the Covid 19 vaccine due to my sincerely held religious beliefs." If you need to say more, then do what you think is best but I think that can be a liability.

If you want me to look over something and sign something to aid you in this, I will do everything I can to help out.

What if you lose your job? If you are convinced that taking the vaccine goes against your sincerely held religious beliefs, then you need to be prepared to lose your job because what's at stake is sin or righteousness. And we don't sellout holiness and conscience for a job or for anything.

Again, I want to be clear that there's room for differences on whether to get vaccinated or not. My point is that if you believe getting vaccinated violates your conscience then no amount of money should tempt you to get it.

As followers of Jesus we need to hold to faithfulness to him no matter what comes. If this means your education or training is put on hold or changed, then so be it. If this means you need to shore up your financial situation so your prepared if you do lose you job, then so be it. We don't let money dictate our conscience.

Turn to Matt 16. How long is all of this going to go on? I have no idea. I was optimistic in February, I don't what to think now. But can I tell you something? None of this caught Jesus by surprise. None of this is hindering the Kingdom from growing. **Read 13-20**

Like Peter, we have the keys to the Kingdom of God. And nothing, not hell, not Covid, is going to stop the Kingdom from advancing.

We have the gospel message that not only gives us hope, but it gives other people hope. We have the one thing they need: eternal life in Christ. That message won't fail. It can't fail, because it's guaranteed by our Savior.

How the sheep overcome wolves is to live wise and holy lives, looking to Jesus.

Pray