

‘Do Not Put the Lord Your God to the Test’

You’ve heard these words before, taken from the book of Deuteronomy. They are especially well known because Jesus quoted them to the devil himself when He was being tempted in the wilderness. Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (see Deut. 6:16, quoted in Matt. 4:7). But what, exactly, does this mean, and how does it apply to Christians and the coronavirus?

On Easter Sunday, a pastor in Louisiana defied the state’s ban on large gatherings, calling his congregation to meet together in celebration. They were not going to be intimidated by a virus. The government was not going to shut them down.

Now, it is reported that the church’s lawyer, who was present in recent church gatherings, is battling COVID-19. Another parishioner’s has now died, allegedly of the virus, though the pastor disputes this.

On March 22, a highly respected pastor in Virginia defied his state’s guidelines, calling his congregation together.

During the service, he pointed out proudly that there were more than 10 people present, encouraging them to greet one another freely. He also proclaimed that “God is larger than this dreaded virus.”

His proclamation was certainly true. God is infinitely larger than this virus or any virus.

Unfortunately, this greatly loved pastor has since passed away, another victim of COVID-19. At present, four other family members have tested positive.

His daughter, one of those infected, is now urging others to

follow the state's safety guidelines.

What is the lesson here?

Should we cower in fear before a virus? Certainly not.

Should we obey every last whim and dictate of the government, even when local administrations are guilty of dangerous overreach? Absolutely not, as the Department of Justice recently affirmed as well.

But we should not put the Lord to a test. In other words, we should not willingly and needlessly put ourselves in harm's way and expect a miracle from Him.

In Matthew 4:5-6, we read that the devil, apparently in a vision, took Jesus to Jerusalem "set Him on the highest point of the temple, and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written, "He shall give His angels charge concerning you," and "In their hands they shall lift you up, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone."'"

Amazingly, Satan quoted the Bible to Jesus, as unbelievable as that sounds. (It's sad but true that the devil knows the Bible a lot better than many Christians do.)

And the devil seemed to have a point. After all, wasn't it written in Psalm 91:11-12 that God's angels would protect His devoted people, not letting them strike their feet against a stone?

If Jesus was really God's Son, making Him the most devoted servant of all, then surely this promise applied to Him.

"Prove it," the devil was saying. "Jump off the pinnacle of the temple, and let the angels catch you."

Jesus replied, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (see Matt. 4:5-7, NIV).

Do you see the point?

It's one thing if you're preaching the gospel overseas in an isolated village and suddenly all the villagers come down sick. Some of them even die.

There you are, all by yourself, doing God's work. And you have no medical help. Either God delivers you or you, too, will get sick or even die.

You can certainly look to Him for protection and healing. There is nothing presumptuous about it.

Or the Lord might send you on a mission to bring the gospel into a dangerous region. You know that you could be killed because of that mission. But you are willing to risk your life for Jesus, and you have counted the cost before embarking on your mission.

It's another thing entirely if you willingly put yourself in the place of danger when you don't have to, then expect God to protect you. It's even worse when you turn things into a public test, thereby bringing potential reproach on the name of the Lord.

The pastor in Louisiana is obviously bold and unashamed about his faith. And he is not afraid to stand up to the government when he feels his rights are being threatened.

But when he says that he and his people are not afraid to die for Jesus and for freedom, with all respect, I believe he misses the point.

First, there is no need to play with a potentially deadly disease. Why die prematurely if God has a longer purpose for your life?

Second, what about the others whom you might infect? What about innocent people you might stand next to in a grocery store, unknowingly transmitting the virus to them?

You might say, "But the Bible commands us to gather together in Hebrews 10:25, and no one is going to stop me from doing that."

Actually, the text is calling us not to get into the habit of isolating ourselves. It is not commanding us to attend every single public service. Nor is it commanding us to gather in large groups. And it is certainly not telling us to ignore public safety guidelines.

Really now, do you quote Hebrews 10:25 when your children come down with chicken pox, taking them to the church service to infect others? Or do you wisely stay at home?

I'm all for being bold in our faith, and I've personally put myself in harm's way to bring the gospel to others. And if the Lord gives us a command, we obey it, regardless of the consequences. But I also understand that it is wrong to put the Lord to the test.

My brand new book, *When the World Stops: Words of Faith, Hope, and Wisdom in the Midst of Crisis*, begins with two chapters designed to help us overcome panic and fear. Faith is our foundation. But the book also includes a chapter titled, "A Little Wisdom Goes a Long Way."

May we be people of both wisdom and faith. And that means not putting our God to the test.

And may these two pastors whom I referenced in this article be best known for their lifelong gospel work rather than for these specific, virus-related events.