

Remove that Mask!

A few years ago a friend of mine encouraged me to see a film which had made a deep impression on him. The film told the story of a young man who had been damaged in his emotional life and he was seeking healing. He makes a vow that he will never again tell a lie even about the most trivial thing. He keeps his vow and regains his health and is inspired to set up a video camera and invite his friends to come and tell their story to the camera. There is one condition to the filming-there must be no pretending. His friends are invited to remove their masks of pretence and tell the truth. The film demonstrates that those who remove the masks and tell the truth get better, and those who lie become more dishonest, bitter and hard in attitude. I remember thinking at the time what a great visual aid on the transparent and honest living Jesus expects from his followers.

Jesus had something to say about those who wear masks of pretence and we can read his devastating commentary on the sin of pretending in Matthew 23.

First there is the mask of pretending you believe that God's good news is for everyone- when in fact you shut the door of the Kingdom in people's faces.(verses 13-14)

Jesus knew that the religious leader of his day were selective about whom they thought God loved. The large print may have read 'whoever wants to may enter God's Kingdom'. But the sub text clearly said- excluding children, women, people who suffer with leprosy, and seriously big sinners like Mr Zachueus of Jericho. If a church wants to know if it is wearing this mask of pretending the good news of the Gospel is for everyone-then check out the church programme. How do we use our time for those beyond the church walls?

Look at the church budget and ask how much money you spend on those who are not yet in the Kingdom? Look at the weekly diary of the church and ask who uses our buildings most? Be bold enough to face the question: Is it possible that we shut the door of the Kingdom of God in people's faces? (verse 13)

Second there is the mask of pretending the that Kingdom belongs to God but secretly we are building our own empires (verse 15)

The religious leaders in the day of Jesus had a vigorous missionary programme. They were so committed they were wiling to travel miles over land and sea to make one convert. When they find this person said Jesus, they make them twice a child of hell.

Strong words! Jesus was issuing the strongest warning about cloning disciples and building our own little empires. The watchword for churches that make clones rather than disciples of Jesus is 'become identical to us' instead of 'become like God'.

It is said that the test of knowing whether you are working for the Lord or building your little empire is two fold: First you imagine you are indispensable and then you begin to use the language of MY church.

Third there is the mask of pretending to be committed to the Lord but failing to keep the promises you make to him (verses 16-22)

We can make serious promises to God but often they have built in escape clauses. Like children in the playground we keep our fingers crossed. We make our promises to God and say everything is yours. I will go anywhere for you Lord, at anytime, at any cost. When God takes us up on the promise we shuffle out feet and say I did not mean *everything!* I did not mean *anywhere!* I did not mean *anytime!* It is said three of the saddest words we use in our personal relationships are: But you promised!

Walter Brueggemann has framed a prayer around this theme of what God expects from those in covenant fidelity with him:

We will be your faithful people-more or less

We will love you with all our hearts-perhaps

We will love our neighbors as ourselves-maybe

We are grateful that with you Lord it is never more or less, perhaps or maybe

With you Lord it is never yes and no-but always yes

Clear direct unambiguous and trustworthy

Fourth there is the mask of pretending we are seeking first the Kingdom-but actually majoring on the minors (verses 23-24)

Jesus steps into the kitchen garden and uses the tiny herbs plants to describe this next mask. It appears that some people were so scrupulous in tithing-they not only tithed their money but also the herbs from the garden. That is serious tithing! But Jesus says it can be a mask and it needs to be removed. He goes on to make clear why he challenges this particular mask. It is possible to be over concerned for the small and insignificant things of life whilst ignoring the large and important issues, what Jesus calls 'Justice mercy and faithfulness' (verse 23). We may count it important that we have the best worship band for miles around, whereas, the priority of Jesus for a local church might be to get involved with the problem of binge drinking by teenagers in a community and addressing the lack of foster parents for older teenagers? Those who follow Jesus are the ones who speak words of Gospel hope into communities who despair of the endless cycle of fear hatred and violence? This ministry of sharing Gospel hope is deeply sacrificial, as many of our churches know, to their great cost.

Fifth there is the mask of pretending everything is well inwardly-when inwardly we are falling apart (verses 25-26)

For this next mask Jesus uses the kitchen sink as an illustration. We all know it is not hygienic to have cups which are clean on the outside but unclean on the inside. So why is it we wear the mask of pretending that outwardly we are alright when inwardly we are falling apart?

I remember visiting a church that was in a deep mess. I said to the leaders when I first met them, how are you? They said to me everything is fine-we are coping. Over a few hours we talked and prayed and shared. During this extended time of fellowship the true picture of how they were feeling emerged. One leader said: 'I have been asking deep question about where is God's will in all this mess?' Another one

said: 'I have feelings of a deep inconsolable sadness'. Then someone shared: 'I confess I have felt angry about everything that has happened and find myself asking how a group of experienced leaders got into this mess in the first place?'. The best that happened is they took off the masks!

The word of God is spot on when it says that if we walk in the light as he in the light then we have true fellowship with each other. This is fellowship without the masks.

Sixth there is the mask of pretending to be alive spiritually when actually I am feeling as dead as a cemetery (verses 27-28)

Jesus uses another powerful visual aid for this mask- the tomb stones and the cemeteries of his day. The beautiful site of whitewashed buildings glistening in the midday sun may look appealing but remember these buildings are tombs full of bones. In spiritual terms we know that outwardly everything can look very attractive, but this can be a mask for spiritual deadness. God's word warns us against having outward forms of godliness which deny the power of the Holy Spirit. It is what Eugene Petersen terms: a religion without commitment to Jesus: a spirituality which leaves no room for the Holy Spirit; a

talk which reveals little concern for God and his glory.

When we know that inwardly something has died we need to tell the Lord that we are like Lazarus requiring a resurrection.

Lord I have no desire to think

No will to pray

No courage for change

No passion for evangelism

No compassion for the poor

No feeling for injustice

Please bring me alive again with your life!

Seventh there is the mask of pretending to listen to God's word but failing to obey it (verses 29-36)

Jesus lastly reminds his audience of some very violent scenes from their history. There have been hundreds of Messengers sent by God and they have suffered abuse and rejection, stoning and murder. Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of honouring these dead prophets by laying flowers at their tomb and crying crocodile tears expressing 'we would have listened carefully to what these prophets had to share. They would never be stoned by us!' The same spirit is alive today. People say, if only we could listen to the sermons of John Wesley or Charles Spurgeon. And sometimes they even say: 'Bring back my favourite pastor and I will be a better Christian!'. Take off the mask of pretending!

The real issue is not to do with the messenger but our response to God's word. The clear question for me as a disciple is: Do I listen for God's word and seek to obey it, whoever the messenger happens to be?

These are tough words from our Master and Lord about removing our masks, but look at how chapter 23 concludes (verses 37-39). It's a powerful lament of Jesus as he cries from the heart: 'O Jerusalem! I wanted to do so much for you-but you would not let me. You shut me out my by all your pretending and wearing of masks'

But we need not be like the city of Jerusalem!

Like Blind Bartimeuas- we can cry Lord have mercy on me I want to see

Like the desperate woman in the crowd we can reach out for the hem of his garment and say I want to be healed

Like Zachueus who had made his money dishonestly we can ask the Lord to restore our lost reputation.

Like Peter who wept buckets of tears for his failure we can hear the grace words of Jesus which cleanse and heal and restore us to ministry.

Take the first step of faith and remove that mask!

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