

Take Off Your Mask

By David de Bruyn

Do you seek to be, or do you seek to appear to be? “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players” – so wrote Shakespeare.

In fact, that is probably an unintentionally to-the-point description of human behaviour at large. It seems that all day, every day, humans are posing, preening and performing for each other – trying to make other humans admire them. From our clothing to our cars, from our hairstyles to our very demeanour when being observed, humans almost universally seek to impress, like actors on the stage of life.

What are we talking about? We're talking about what the Bible calls hypocrisy. Hypocrisy – the sin of deceiving the world about the true state of your heart with a false exterior. Hypocrisy comes from the Greek word 'hupocrites' – which literally referred to an actor in classical times who wore a mask on stage. His true face was hidden behind an exterior that was not his own.

Hypocrisy runs right through human society. From the earliest ages, we want others to accept, admire and respect us. We speak of 'putting our best foot forward' – and you will hardly ever find a human who is completely unconcerned about his image.

Indeed, how many people eat the bitter fruit of hypocrisy in marriage? All through the dating stage, they pretend to be someone they are not, trying to impress, trying to gain admiration. Then when marriage comes, the mask comes off, and you find couples saying, 'You're not the person I thought I was marrying.' Hypocrisy – always an act.

In fact, there's nothing wrong with wanting a respectable image, otherwise you enter the realm of the shameless. However, the sin of hypocrisy finds its roots in something else – man-pleasing. Man-pleasing is desiring honour and respect, indeed, frankly – worship. Man-pleasing is bowing down at the idol of others' worship of you. It makes the approval of others its living bread.

Hypocrisy is simply the deception that grows out of man-pleasing. In our efforts to have the world admire us, we inwardly know that what is inside us is not that admirable at all. So, hypocrisy is the false exterior we produce to convince the world we are truly wonderful.

Of course, nothing is a greater stench in the nostrils of God, than those who use His name, and His work, to this end. When we enter the spiritual realm, hypocrisy takes on its ugliest overtones. For here, like no other place, we are meant to be dealing with truth. Like never before, sincerity and openness are the order of the day.

The Christian faith is supposed to be the clearest, most uncluttered representation of reality possible. Yet sadly, this is not the case. The pride in human hearts is drawn towards the appearance of being holy; it slithers up to the honour received for being a religious leader of some kind. Pride finds a healthy banquet for itself within the church, and many have a feast.

Our Lord Jesus had perhaps his strongest words for hypocrites. Prostitutes, tax collectors and covetous people got off lightly, compared to how Jesus rebuked those who posed as righteous by sitting in the place of spiritual leadership, but inwardly were wicked. His anger was directed not primarily at their wickedness, but at their deception. Indeed, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Christ was angered mainly by their hardened, proud hearts, which deceived others. He hated their phony righteousness, their manipulation of spiritual matters to gain the approval of men. He hated their man-pleasing hypocrisy more than anything else. Hear what He said of them, and notice the recurring theme – to receive honour from men:

But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi...

Matthew 23:5-7

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Matthew 23:25-28

What a stinging indictment – *all* their works are done to be seen of men. Christ says that not a single thing they did was from a pure heart. It was all rooted in the desire to be honoured by others. It was all an outward show – beautiful to behold, but inwardly as attractive to God as a rotting corpse.

And before we shake our heads at the Pharisees, how deep does this run in our hearts? From the moment we arrive at church, how much posturing and performing goes on? From the teeth-filled grins we flash to show how full of joy we are, to the closed eyes during a song, so that someone might notice how intensely we worship. From the notes we take during the sermon in hopes people will regard us as really serious about the Word, to our ‘amens’ in hopes of being counted spiritual by the pastor.

How about the giving? Trying to look humble and pious as we put our money in, so that others may think we are humbly sacrificial. What of even going forward during an invitation to display what remorseful and committed people we are. How twisted we can be. Mark now, the service is over, it is the ‘glorify the worm ceremony’ – shake the pastor’s hand and let him know how wonderful the message was, when in truth, you were bored – but impressing the pastor is perhaps a bulls-eye in the game of religious man-pleasing.

What of the jockeying for position in the church – to be in a position surely proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are holy and righteous. What of our conversations before and afterwards? Their very content is heard nowhere else except in the church parking lot. How different is our conversation with those people from the ones we have on Monday morning at work, or when we see old school-friends, or even two hours later, with our spouse?

For so many, it is all a show, all a performance, all a pursuit of nothing deeper than the admiration of other sinners. Instead of seeking to be holy, we are seeking to appear to be holy.

Why do we do this? Why do we wear a mask? Why do we pretend – learn the Christian lingo, smile appropriately, nod sagely at the right times – but continue to harbour spiritual poverty in our hearts? Why do we wear a mask?

Firstly, we fear discovery. We fear that if we are open and honest about our miserable failures, people will reject us. Especially in a spiritual atmosphere, we sense the climate is not conducive for sinners, so

we seek to pretend to be what we are not. Indeed, if secret, soul-destroying sin, is present, the mask is more than simply protection, it is diversion. People need to be distracted from looking too deeply, lest they see the painful reality of what's inside.

Secondly, we crave approval. We want to fit in, and be admired. No one likes to feel they are lagging behind, or have dropped the ball. No one likes to feel the painful reality of sin, and if we feel we need to manufacture a façade of spirituality to fit in, we will do it. We want to feel that we are like these other righteous people, and often we do what we do anywhere else socially – we start to copy and imitate so that we will not stick out.

Well, what's the big deal about wearing a mask? Is that really so bad? Yes, it is, for a number of reasons.

1. Hypocrisy in the truest sense, will damn your soul.

See, there's a difference between the true hypocrite and the one guilty of hypocrisy. A true hypocrite, biblically, is one who pretends to be saved, and is not. You see, a true Christian can be guilty of hypocrisy at times in his or her life. The very apostle Peter was found guilty of this.

Galatians 2 shows us that Peter was trying to impress the Jews by separating from the Gentile Christians. He was being false, since he had abandoned much of the Mosaic traditions himself. However, he gave in to hypocrisy – trying to appear better before others. Paul rebuked him before everyone, which was fitting, since hypocrisy is trying to look good in front of everyone.

Nevertheless, his hypocrisy didn't make him a hypocrite in the final sense of the word. For none is a greater hypocrite than the one who professes to be saved to gain men's approval, but in his heart knows he has never repented and confessed Christ as Lord. Such people, tragically, will one day find their mask was transparent when it came to the eyes of the Lord:

Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Matthew 7:21-23

Many will find their religious service was invalid – it was all a show, and it involved no heart relationship to God.

2. You will receive a pathetic reward from hypocrisy

Jesus speaks to the issue of hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount. Describing the hypocritical nature of the Pharisees methods of praying, fasting and giving, he ends each description of their hypocrisy with this phrase: 'Truly – they have their reward.' What does this mean? It means just that. As they posture and perform to gain the admiration of others – that is what they get. They get the admiration, and no more.

You want people to admire you for being such a spiritual Christian? Then perform, and that is what you will receive – admiration. Admiration, and that alone; nothing more: how sadly pathetic. That, to me, is

like a bunch of lepers pretending to have cleaner skin than each other, so that the others will envy and admire, when the Great Physician Himself stands near. What on earth are we doing trying to gain the approval of fellow sinners, when the approval of God is all that counts?

3. You will not enjoy God if you seek to impress people

Jesus makes a remarkable statement in **John 5**:

I receive not honour from men. But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?

John 5:41-45

That's profound. Jesus is clearly telling us that honour becomes an either/or thing in the spiritual realm. Seek to gain honour from each other – you cannot be seeking honour from God. Seek the honour that comes from God only – you will have your eyes off the approval of men. It reminds us of His principle of two masters in **Matthew 6:24**: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.”

Clearly, to pursue the honour of men will at some point come at the expense of approval from God. To always try to impress others with your spirituality necessarily means you have a horizontal focus, not a vertical one. You cannot seek to please self, by gaining the approval of man, *and* seek to please God. The two are natural enemies: self and God, pride and humility.

Following Christ necessitates we deny self – literally disown, reject ourselves, in favour of God. You cannot be God-fearing and hypocritical at the same point in time – for one who is God-fearing has God as His master at that point; the one who is hypocritical has self as His master at that point.

How do I take it off? Deep in our hearts, we long for the relief of humility. Nothing is more liberating than forgiveness – for it means all that we were hiding has now been exposed, and dealt with. In our hearts, we long to know and be known, and be accepted as we are.

The burden of maintaining a false exterior is a hard one, always having to patch cracks, being ever vigilant for one who might see through the mask. What tearful relief to take it off, and say, ‘See, now you know how bad I really am.’ Our pride craves hypocrisy for self-protective reasons, and yet our redeemed hearts crave humility for truth’s sake. So how do we deal with it? How do we learn to live real in an unreal world? Jesus has the answers for us in **Matthew 6:1-16**.

Man-pleasing is hiding the secret nature of your heart with a false exterior. Christ’s remedy is to change in secret, and deliberately cut off chances for your flesh to boast.

Christ’s First Antidote to Hypocrisy is – Practise Anonymous Service

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left

hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:1-4

Don't do your service, the giving of your time, talents, resources to be seen and praised by men. Instead, says our Lord, don't let your left hand know what the right is doing. In other words – let your service be anonymous, in contrast to the attention-seeking of the hypocrite. That doesn't mean we have to try and cover our tracks; it just means we must practice the art of serving God, and forgetting about it.

How often we try to slip into a conversation a mention of that hospital visit we did, the extra time we spent cleaning up at church, or the sacrifices we've made for God. Oh, we try to be so subtle about it, but we are blowing a trumpet – that others may see. Learn the beauty of doing things for God that no one will ever know about, except maybe those you did it for.

Learn the delight of doing things for God and saying, 'For you Lord Jesus,' and protect that precious gift from your own pride by not speaking about it. There's a greater reward for those who deliberately refuse the reward of men's approval, and wait by faith, for God's.

Christ's second antidote for hypocrisy is – Practise Secret Religion

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:5-6

Christ emphasizes secret devotion to God. Prayer and Bible study out of sight of man is one of the strongest antidotes to hypocrisy. You see, when you get alone with God, the solitude emphasizes the reality of the Christian life. There's no one to observe you, no one to impress, no one to applaud – just you and God. Making that a habit trains your heart to be still, to see that it really is about God, not about others. The one who spends little or no time in the presence of God, must compensate by trying to gain love, approval and admiration from God's children – and that's usually by pretence.

Another reason why going into your closet to pray is important is that your time alone with God will emphasise the spiritual reality of knowing Him. You will see answers to prayers, and receive illumination of the Word when you pray. It is only one who never eats at the table of God who then resorts to chewing on the dry bone of man's approval. It is a lean and hungry soul that is scavenging for approval from men, when the very feast of God's Word lays waiting.

Christ's third antidote for hypocrisy is – Practise Godward Living

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Matthew 6:16-18

Jesus is saying, instead of trying to show others what you are doing for God – act no differently from what you usually would. Anoint your head, wash your face, and don't try to appear different for your service to God. Why not? So that you do not appear to fast unto men, but unto thy Father which is in secret.

Basically, He says, 'Live your life unto God.' Your Father will see your fast, or your sacrifice, or whatever it may be. Godward living means that the focus of what I do is for Him. I do not disfigure my face to draw attention from men; indeed I make sure I conduct myself in such a way as to draw no unnecessary attention. Thus – my sacrifice, my service, my obedience is Godward – totally uncluttered with the temptation to receive praise from men.

There is a pulpit in a church in Johannesburg, and behind it are the words, 'God is my audience.' That's the motto of a Christian at all times – God is my audience. God is here – right now. I live unto Him. Didn't Paul touch on this very theme when speaking to slaves? He said:

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men...

Ephesians 6:5-7

Paul says, 'Don't work in such a way as to only serve when man is watching. Instead, be sincere – serve as unto Christ. Don't serve or work or do well only when man's eyes are on you – but realize God's eyes are on you at all times.' Indeed, **Proverbs 15:3** sums it up well: "*The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.*"

Live Godwardly. This is the difference between the God-fearing man, and the man-fearing man. The God-fearing man wants the approval of God above all else. He remembers the presence of God at all times – it governs his life. The fear of the Lord brings honour. **Proverbs 29:25** tells that man-pleasing brings the opposite: "*The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe.*"

It's a sad thing to live behind a mask. Yes, it's painful to face your sin, and even more painful to have it exposed. Yet it is better to take off the mask and live real, than to live with the gnawing conscience that whispers to us in the still of the night – 'You're a phony.' Indeed, even if we take off our mask and find people reject us, **Ephesians 1:6** tells us we are accepted in the Beloved. In Christ, we are forgiven.

As believers, we are cleansed lepers – we do not boast in our cleansing, as if it were our own, and we are to forgive, forbear and be patient with each other. **James 5:16** instructs us to '*confess your faults one to another*'. That only happens when the masks come off, when we have given up on the dry bone of trying to impress each other, and have dropped the façade.

In place of boasting, we practice *Anonymous Service*. We delight not in telling others what we have done; we delight in how much we have never told anyone. In place of a show of spirituality, we practice secret religion. We genuinely meet with God – and experience the grand reality of the Christian life – God Himself.

We *Practice Godward Living* in place of posturing and performing. We raise our sights from horizontal to vertical – we will seek to love men, but not to impress them. We desire approval from God.

Christ is clear – to live in this way will result in open reward from God. Once again, the beautiful paradoxes of the Christian life are in effect. We must die to live, surrender to win victory, humble ourselves to be exalted, and here is one more. We must serve God secretly, anonymously, avoiding the opportunity to boast, so that God may at some point, openly praise us. However, if we seek the praise of man, we forfeit the pleasure of God, and get the booby prize of the admiration of fickle human beings.

What would you rather have? The pleasure of a God-pleasing, humble, sincere and honest walk with God, where your failures are known yet accepted by your peers, or the striving, restless experience of one always trying to maintain, repair and build an exterior he knows has no internal reality.

Christ had all the time in the world for repentant sinners. He had very little time for those who lived behind masks. If you're living behind a mask – take it off. Don't seek to appear to be. Seek to be.