

“GET REAL! (#1): TAKING OFF THE MASKS”

(Matthew 23:25-26)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 7-31-11]

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1. [BOTH Services (9:30am MSG; 11am NRSV):] Read Text: Matthew 23:25-26 and Pray.

2. [STORY OF GORILLA SUIT RELIGION]

There was once a man desperate for a job who discovered that a new city zoo had an opening. After being hired, he was told that, being so new, they hadn't yet gotten a live gorilla. So, after proper training, his job was to dress up like a gorilla and make the crowds believe that he was a real animal of the zoo. The man did this and actually began to enjoy it immensely.

One day, though, the door to the lion's cage – next to the gorilla's cage – was accidentally left ajar, and as the gorilla-man was performing tricks for his audience, a lion entered the gorilla cage.

And though the spectators tried to get the gorilla's attention to warn him that there was a lion in his cage, he thought that they were merely impressed by his tricks, and so kept doing more. But, the lion's roar finally brought him to his senses, and he tried over and over to scare off the lion – all to no avail. Finally, he tried playing dead.

But at that, the lion began sniffing the gorilla, and the man in the gorilla-suit couldn't take it any longer! He started screaming and yelling for help. But as he did it, the lion got up in his face, and suddenly he heard a voice: “*Shut Up, you fool, or you'll get us both fired!*”

3. Well, there's a lot of us today who have what I'd call “Gorilla-suit” Christianity – we're “fake” and “phony,” pretending to be something (and someone) we know that we're not.

A–Oh, we might have all the *outward appearances* of faith – we might go to church regularly, read our Bible, pray, don't drink or do drugs, and are just “good people.”

B–But in our heart of hearts, we know that there are things about us that aren't right: we have passions or tempers we often can't control; bad habits we can't seem to break; maybe even an apathy towards God or the plight of others.

C–Well, that's exactly what today's scripture from Matthew 23 describes: people who live a double life – who act *one* way, when *reality* is something very *different*.

D–And for the next 5 weeks, we're going to be exploring a few ways the Bible can help us replace our “phony” lives with “real” ones – to teach us how to “Get Real” by being more authentic and genuine in our relationships with ourselves, others, and God.

4. Now, if we're going to do this, then one of the first things we've got to do is acknowledge & understand the ways we consciously & unconsciously often cover up & hide the “real” us.¹

A–In other words, we need to discover and understand the “MASKS” that we all wear: ²
[PUT ON SEVERAL MASKS FROM ALTAR AS I CONTINUE TO TALK...]

1–They can be plain and ordinary... or fancy and colorful...

2–They can cover up our *whole* being,... or cover up just a little of us...

3–But whatever form they take, they prevent others (and sometimes even ourselves) from seeing and acknowledging who we *really* are.

B–Now, there are *many* such “masks,” but today I want to introduce us to just *three*, and how we can learn to be more “real” (as human beings and as Christians) by allowing God to help us take these off. ³ (*Find these in your bulletin sermon notes...*)

–II–

5. The first of these is one of the most popular masks of all – it’s the mask of “**SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**” that Jesus denounces the Pharisees for wearing in today’s scripture.

A–Also known as “*Legalism*” or “*A Judgmental Spirit*,” it’s where people who either don’t know how or are unable to deal with their *own* problems try to cope with them by reflecting/mirroring them off onto *others*:

1–“*If my preacher had only done this for me...*”

2–“*If my church or Sunday School class had only done that...*”

3–“*If my boss had only been a little more understanding...*”

3–“*If my wife would only attend more to MY needs...*”

4–“*If my husband would only listen to me more... then I wouldn’t be in this mess!*”

B–People who wear this mask always seem to think that the problems of *their* life, or in *their* church, or in *their* work are always some *else’s* fault, and are never willing to acknowledge any responsibility at all. ⁴

1–It often gives us a *unreasonably* passionate sense of right and wrong that blinds us to the sin of our own demanding and judgmental spirit.

2–We become like the Pharisees in today’s scripture – so caught up in condemning the “speck” in the eye of *others* that we can’t see the “log” of sin in our own. ⁵

C–Now, I need to point out that there’s a variation of this mask that’s especially prominent in Christian circles called “*Religiosity*” or the “*Church Mask*”, in which people use overt expressions of religious faith and activity to cover up / deflect their own insecurities and feelings of inadequacy.

1 –They’ll quote the Bible left and right to you, and brag about their regular church attendance, or their great spiritual experiences with God.

2–But they often lack common sense about how to apply those to everyday living – you could say that they’re “*so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good.*”⁶

3–People like this (including some pastors and church volunteers, by the way!) often use their ministry or job as a way of avoiding problems, while on the *outside* all people see is how “dedicated” and “hard working” they are.⁷

4–But this is again what was happening with the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, leading him to chastise them the way he did in today’s scripture.

6. A second mask called “**TOGETHERNESS**” is one that we wear well here in the South! It’s one I unconsciously wore from a young age, & one that I’ve struggled to take off ever since!

A–Sometimes called “*Self-Sufficiency / Toughness / Pride,*” it’s a mask that refuses to allow our *inner* needs or hurts to show on the *outside* because we somehow think it’s a sign of weakness (Examples: “*Never let them see you sweat!*” “*Real men don’t cry*”)

1–You’ve all heard of the Christian “four-letter-word” that starts with “F”, haven’t you? “*FINE*” ... as in: “*How are you doing?*” “*FINE!*” ...when we know we’re really *not* – but we *dare not* let it show!

2–You see, by its very nature, this mask prevents us from getting the help we need because we think that others will think less of us if we admit that we *need* help.⁸

B–You know, there’ve times in my own life when I needed help, but couldn’t bring myself to ask for it because “*I’m a pastor, and a mature Christian! I dare not let anyone see the ‘kinks in my armor’ or see that I don’t have it all ‘together,’*” because people might not accept me anymore – and so I wore a mask of “togetherness.”

C–Well, some of *you* are wearing this same mask *today*:

1–You need marriage counseling, or financial counseling; or you’re trying to overcome personal problems/addictions all by yourself; or at the very least you need to talk to a Pastor or Stephen Minister from our church.

2–But you won’t do any of these, because you’re too proud, and you “mask” it outwardly by telling others (and yourself), “*Well, I’m just a private person!*”

3–Let me tell you what I’ve discovered: as long as you and I hide behind this mask of “togetherness” (of “self-sufficiency” and “toughness”, trying to handle problems by *ourselves*), we’ll *never* overcome them.

7. The final mask I want to mention today is what I call “**NEEDINESS.**”

A–It’s really the opposite of “togetherness” because it refers to someone who constantly wears their own personal needs *on their sleeves* as a way of getting attention.

B—This person’s needs are the center of their universe, and all of life is viewed from the perspective of what *others* can (and should) do for *them*.

1—I’ve know people like this (perhaps you have, too) who seem to be constantly sick, or are *always* in dire financial or emotional need – they never can seem to get back on their feet without something else bad happening.

2—And what they don’t realize is that *their own* need to be “needy” is preventing them from receiving the *real* help that’ll enable them grow up and mature.

3—And what’s ironic is that, in my counseling with such people, I’ve learned that they seem to think that *their* neediness *proves* the selfishness and stinginess of *others*, when, in fact, it probably only confirms the depth of their own self-centeredness.

–III–

8. Now, there are plenty of *other* “masks” we could talk about, if we had time – the “masks” of “Power/Success,”⁹ “Intellectualism” and “Emotionalism,”¹⁰ “Detail,”¹¹ and many others.

A—But these three (Self-Righteousness, Togetherness, and Neediness) are ones that we Christians popularly hide behind, even if unconsciously.¹²

B—And until / unless we can *recognize* and *acknowledge* them, we’re not going to be able to fully appropriate the grace and healing of God to *overcome* them.¹³

C—Referring to Jesus’ words in Matthew 23, Christian psychologist Larry Crabb writes, “A principle that must guide all our efforts to change into the person God wants us to be [is that] there is no place for pretense. We must come to grips with what’s going on behind the whitewashed appearance of our life,... [for] we can’t make it if we don’t [first] face all that we are.”¹⁴

9. You see, God desires more than *anything* to give you and me a life of abundance and peace and joy – to help us “*Get (More) Real*” with ourselves, with each other, and with Him.¹⁵

A—But we can’t truly do that until we first acknowledge the mask(s) we wear and invite Him to help us take them off.¹⁶

B—Will it be scary? Sure!

C—Will it be difficult and painful? Most likely!¹⁷

D—But by “*Taking Off The Masks*,” will you and I be able to become more authentic Christians and human beings? You bet!

10. [PRAYER: “*Lord Jesus, we acknowledge today that there are many of us in this room who are wearing masks that keep us from being ‘real’ Christians and prevent us from being the best people for each other and for you that we could be. We ask today that you give us the wisdom and insight and courage to help us to see the subtle masks that we wear which prevent us from addressing and confronting the sin and pain of our lives.*
We invite your Holy Spirit to come down and peel back the hard layers of stone encasing our hearts which have caused us to become callous towards you and towards others, and to replace these with hearts that are transparent to you and other safe people, and more receptive to your love. O God, enable us to draw upon your Spirit’s power to learn to be increasingly REAL... with you, with ourselves, and with others. We pray all of this in the name of the one who showed us what it means to be and to live a ‘real’ life of faith, the name of Jesus, Amen.”]
11. [**Traditional Service Closing:** UMH#420 “Breath On Me Breath of God”: (*Have Prayer Ministers or Stephen Ministers available at altar during song and after service*)]

ENDNOTES:

1. Christian psychologist Larry Crabb says that “*Most of us cope with life by pretending. We pretend that what we have satisfies us more than it does. And we pretend that we haven’t been hurt as badly as we have,*” and he goes on to say that while it’s a subtle sin, this pretending “*...is serious because it motivates much of how we behave with each other*” (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, pp. 97 & 109). Crabb refers to it as the “sin of self-protection”—a style of relating to others designed to avoid the experience of personal pain. He says that “*many Christians manage to keep life moving along rather smoothly without ever looking deeply at the pain in their souls*” (p. 99).
 In describing how it affects our behaviors with others, he illustrates, “*Friendliness can protect us from rejection. Humor can help us avoid isolation. Businesslike efficiency can keep [us] from a tenderness that might be exploited. Shyness might be the means to keep us from ever looking foolish. ... We tend to relate to one another with the hidden purpose of maintaining our comfort and avoiding whatever sort of interaction we find threatening*” (Crabb, pp. 109 & 132). Christian counselor/author Paul Tripp refers to this same condition as “spiritual blindness,” and says that “*spiritually blind people do not think they are blind because their blindness wears many masks*” (Paul David Tripp, Instruments In the Redeemer’s Hands, p. 287).
2. Bible writers acknowledged the existence of “masks.” For example, Romans 1:22 and Revelation 3:17.
3. An excellent resource that unpacks various “masks” we often wear is Russell Willingham’s book Relational Masks: Removing the Barriers That Keep Us Apart (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004). All of the “masks” I discuss in this sermon are discussed there (some by different names), plus more.
4. It’s not that other people *don’t* have problems or things they need to work on, but a person wearing this mask constantly hides behind the shortcomings of OTHERS in order to avoid their OWN shortcomings. “*At its core, to be spiritually blind means to think you are righteous when really you are not*” (Paul David Tripp, Instruments In the Redeemer’s Hands, p. 286).
5. Matthew 7:1-5. Consequently, when these type of people relate to others, they often carry with them a long list of unspoken demands and silent expectations, and offer only a bitter and judgmental spirit when others fail to live up to those lists.
6. Christian author and psychologist Larry Crabb says that, “*Much of what passes for spiritual maturity [today] is maintained by a rigid denial of all that is happening beneath the surface of [one’s] life*” (Crabb,

Inside Out, p. 33).

7. This is especially true when dealing with grief or loss: some people use busy-ness at home, work, or in their church as a coping mechanism to avoid having to go through the painful and often difficult process of grief.

8. *“I think we are unreal about ourselves, even as Christians, because we are afraid that if people find out what we are actually like inside, behind the mask, find out that we really don't honestly want to be with them socially as much as we imply, they will not accept us and therefore we won't be able to fulfill our self-centered needs through our associations with them”* (Keith Miller in *“The Taste of New Wine,” Christianity Today* magazine, Vol. 31, no. 7).

9. The mask of **“POWER / SUCCESS”** is when we allow our power or a sense of self-accomplishment in life to blind us (or others) to our own shortcomings. Author Flora Slosson Wuellner tells of an old Chinese ivory carving that one side contains a ferocious, frowning face. Their eyes are glaring and the mouth is grimly turned down in a condemning fashion. Everything about this face conveys angry power and judgment. But on the other side of the figure, there is a figure of timid, gentle, vulnerable-looking actor crouched down, speaking through the face on the front of the carving – that power, obviously, was merely a mask of the reality (Wuellner, Prayer, Stress, and Our Inner Wounds, p. 51). Many of us do the same.

I've seen this in corporate executives who try to over-compensate for *“Mommy and Daddy's high expectations”* by amassing great power and control, hiding behind that power and the economic “success” of their business. I've seen this in housewives raised in abusive homes who grow up to hide their shame and hurt as adults behind their own “successfully” raised family. And we all even know about pastors and evangelists like Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Bakker who hid their personal and emotional needs behind the “success” of their church, or who hide behind the number of souls they've saved through their ministry.

10. The masks of **“INTELLECTUALISM”** and **“EMOTIONALISM”** are really no more than mirror images of each other. It's when we hide behind EITHER a rational intellect and sense of “order” OR behind overt displays of physical emotion, hoping no one will see our deep insecurities and fears about life.

For many years I myself wore the mask of “intellectualism” – I had wounds from my childhood that I was uncomfortable with others seeing, so all too often I found myself intellectualizing conversations that got too personal or too close to home, and I'd often organize things to death in an unconscious effort to avoid feeling “out of control.” Of course, I know other people who wear the opposite mask of “emotionalism” – they use emotion as a way of avoiding having to think or use common sense in understanding an issue or making a decision. People wearing this “mask” often seem to think that if they can just get emotionally hyped-up enough, then it means they're being “led by the Holy Spirit,” which therefore cancels their responsibility to use their God-given intellect or brains in dealing with life.

Of course, both the “intellectuals” and the “emotionals” detest the other: people who wear a mask of intellectualism often look down their noses at the emotional ones as being unsophisticated fanatics; while people who wear the mask of emotionalism think the intellectuals are stuck-up, unspiritual “fuddy-dufs.” The irony is that both are merely deceiving themselves.

11. The mask of **“DETAIL”** is often diagnosed in medical circles as “O.C.D.” – *“obsessive compulsive disorder.”* It refers to one's need to have everything (and everyone) in life organized and structured “just so,” or else the person becomes agitated and stressed out. For some, this is a medical disorder, but others actually learn to wear this as a “mask” *without* any medical need to do so.

12. I also should point out that because these “masks” are often worn unconsciously, many people get mad and defensive when confronted with these hard truth about themselves.

13. *“We will not recognize the subtle sin of self-protection until we realize the pain from which we want to protect ourselves”* (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 109). *“Spiritual blindness is deceptive because it masquerades as other things. If we are going to [receive healing...] then we must recognize the typical masks that spiritual blindness wears”* (Paul David Tripp, Instruments In the Redeemer’s Hands, p. 279).

14. Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 38.

15. *“We were designed by a God who wants us to trust His love enough to freely love others, not to protect our longings from... injury”* (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 131).

16. *“When the mask of self-righteousness has been torn from us and we stand stripped of all our accustomed defenses, we are candidates for God’s generous grace”* [Erwin W. Lutzer, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1992), Entry#5238]. Crabb says that when our masks are acknowledged and dealt with head on, *“when people get to know each other’s hurts and disappointments, when issues that really matter are actually talked about, then there is the potential for life-changing fellowship”* (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 177).

In fact, the reality is that when we come in the presence of Jesus, the “taking away of our masks” is something that will inevitably occur anyway: *“Jesus Christ is unique, and one cannot be in his presence and not reveal the man he really is. Jesus pulls each person from behind his mask. In the exposure of that bleeding love on the cross, men become what they really are. You may think you are wonderful until you stand in the presence of the One who is purity itself. It is the pure light of God that pierces a man. You can keep up your pretense of being holy until you stand in that light. Then immediately there is nowhere to hide, all your masks are torn away, all your hollow smiles fade. Revival means to be exposed for what we are. The presence of the Lord is revealing”* [Bishop Festo Kivengere, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry #9741].

17. This is true because, as Crabb notes, that *“the death of pride feels like the death of our self”* (Crabb, Inside Out, p. 42 Endnote).