

## "The Night the Mask Fell Off"

It's late at night. Jesus has been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and is led by armed guards to the high priest's residence. One of the disciples, Simon Peter, dares to follow behind, but at a distance. It's a chilly night, Peter joins some others around a fire in the courtyard.

Sitting there, trying to get warm, Peter notices one of the servant girls staring at him. Feeling uncomfortable, he looks down at the ground, shuffling his feet a bit. All of a sudden the girl points to Peter and says to the group, "This man was with Him". Instantly, Peter shoots back, "Look young lady, I don't know Him." His heart starts to pound, and feeling very uncomfortable, he leaves, and goes over to a porch nearby.

A little bit later, someone approaches, glances at Peter, and says to those nearby: "This man was one of those who were with Jesus." "I am not!" Peter insists, the pitch of his voice getting higher.

An hour or so passes. Peter is still there, waiting to see what the high priest is going to do with Jesus. He's on edge. He senses that the bystanders around him are talking about him. The low whispers, the occasional glances his way. Then yet another person speaks up: "I'm *sure* this man is one of Jesus' disciples! I can tell from His Galilean accent!" At that, Peter loses control of himself and really get loud: "Listen, I don't know what you're talking about!" And he curses him.

He hasn't even finished this brief sentence, when a rooster crows. And Jesus, who is nearby, hears what Peter has said. Let Luke finish this story: "The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly" Luke 22:61-62.

"*He went out and wept.....bitterly.*" ***In a sense, Peter's mask fell off that night.*** How is Peter normally described in the New Testament? What kind of picture of him do we get? Impulsive. Somewhat cocky and self-assured. He's the one who usually speaks up. He's the one leading the pack. At times he's bold – he's the one who got out of the boat and tried to walk on the water as Jesus was doing. That's his *persona*. Big. Bold. Brazen.

But that night, outside the high priest's residence, the mask of cocky self-assurance comes off his face. Seeing Jesus arrested, and now rushed to trial, he's *scared, confused, cowardly*. And after denying in front of others that he even knows Jesus, he breaks down and sobs – he's feeling *guilty and ashamed*. His mask of pretending fell off.

***Most of us have an assortment of masks we wear for different occasions.*** Masks to impress people. Masks to hide our true thoughts or feelings.

Small children have a refreshing way of just saying what they think or feel. Now I'm not suggesting we adults say whatever is on our mind, even if it means hurting or shaming someone. But there is something to be said about children's ability to *just be real and not wear masks of pretension*.

Perhaps what is even more frightening is that some of us have been pretending for so long that we don't even know who we are behind all the masks we wear. It's like going to a Halloween party and wearing a costume with a mask, and coming home, standing in front of a mirror, and when we take off our mask there is no face behind it!

John Killinger has written some poignant words about our habit of wearing masks, pretending. "Sometimes when we forget, we let our masks drop. A friend of mine did when his wife was facing a serious operation – he broke down and cried. There was a picture in the paper of a man who did when he was arrested for stock forgeries and taken to prison – he didn't figure it was necessary to pretend any more."

I can think of other people in the Bible whose masks came off. King David, for example. When the prophet Nathan confronts him about his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, and all that entailed, his mask of innocence drops off and he utters these anguished words found in Psalm 51: "Have mercy on me, O God...for I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...you desire truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:1,3,6). And Zacchaeus, the short little tax collector, who throws aside his "I'm a wealthy businessman mask", and scampers up a tree so he can get a glimpse of Jesus. As a result, he finds salvation in the Lord!

***If we'd dare to remove our masks of pretending, what might people see?*** There was a popular song when I was a teenager that had these words:

"Oh yes, I'm the great pretender, pretending that I'm doing well. My need is such, I pretend too much, I'm *lonesome*, but no one can tell.

"Oh yes, I'm the great pretender, adrift in a world of my own; I seem to be what I'm not, you see; I'm *lonesome*, but no one can tell."

Underneath our smiley, happy face mask, people might see that we're lonely, or sad, or afraid, or even quietly desperate. Beneath the religious mask we wear (especially on Sunday morning), people might see that we're not so pure or good as we pretend to be. And if we dare to take off our "Mr. Nice Guy" "Ms. Nice Lady" masks that we wear when we're out in public, people might see that *on the inside* we're often jealous, critical, mean-spirited.

*Sometimes Christians are among the worst pretenders!* Karl Olsson talks about Christians who feel we need to push our real feelings under the surface without admitting or expressing them. He writes about the "host of Christian people who dare not have normal feelings or...express them because to do so is to cast aspersions on God's power to keep them. The cheerful Christian who dares not show pain or irritation, the joyous Christian who does not grieve, the loving Christian who is never angry, the serene Christian who is never ruffled, the calm Christian who is never anxious or fearful, the clean Christian who is not troubled by his sexuality..."

***Jesus didn't wear masks of pretension.*** He was honest and real with God, and with people. He called a spade a spade. He referred to King Herod as "that fox". He called the Pharisees

"hypocrites", "a brood of vipers", to their face! He was open and vulnerable enough to admit to His disciples His dread of being crucified, real enough to reveal in detail how He was tempted in the wilderness. He is our example and model for being a real and authentic person.

***So why do we wear masks? Why do we feel the need to pretend? We're afraid of being different: "I must be the only person like this."*** We look around at church, for example, and people seem so religious and happy. They couldn't be struggling with depression, or thinking of cheating on their income taxes. They don't have trouble praying, or struggle to trust God like I do. So we pretend – not realizing that others have the same struggles I do.

*We wear masks of pretension for fear of being rejected.* If people see I'm not the cheerful, cordial, calm, clean person I appear to be, they won't like me any more, they won't respect me. But here's the thing: most often, the opposite happens. Isn't it true that we're more drawn to people who we see struggling with life just as we do, than we are to those who appear to be so much better than us, so much more invincible.

*We hide behind masks because it's just easier than being honest with people.* Someone has hurt or offended me in some way. But I don't like conflict, and so I just pretend everything's fine and hold tight to my smiley mask around them. Someone really needs to be confronted about their behavior, but I'm uncomfortable doing that. So I put on this mask that says, "everything's fine", rather than being real like Jesus, and calling a spade a spade.

Luke writes of Peter, "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). ***What happened to Peter after that miserable night when his mask fell off, and his sense of failure and guilt and remorse was exposed? Do you remember/*** Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared different times to the disciples. One time was when they were by the Sea of Galilee. Peter is there. It must have been awkward, humiliating. Big bold Peter has denied Jesus three times. Chickened out.

But Jesus doesn't ream him out. Jesus picks this man up, dusts him off, and gives him another chance. Three times he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." "Feed my lambs." In other words, "I'm calling you once again to follow Me. I'm giving you a mission. I'm going to use you to strengthen your fellow believers, to build up My church."

See, if we can take our masks off and dare to quit pretending so much, it can open up a whole new relationship with God - and with other people! ***It can breath new life into our relationship with God.*** If we can just come clean with God! Like King David did. After all, God sees behind the mask anyway! God knows who and what we really are. In forgiving and restoring Peter, Jesus showed us that God not only *knows* the person we are behind the mask, God *loves* the person we are behind that mask! God can forgive us heal us, restore us, and use us.

***If we can quit pretending so much it can also bring new life and healing to our relationships with others.*** I've already mentioned how being more open about our shortcomings and struggles

more often than not doesn't *distance* us from people: it *draws us closer* to people. Oral Roberts was a TV evangelist. At one point in his life his daughter and son-in-law were killed in an accident. Several people told me how a few times when Oral talked about it on his TV program he broke down and cried. One of the persons said to me, "I don't think he should have done that." Why? Does this mean he's not strong in his faith or that we can no longer respect him as a leader? No. It just means he's human, and real. My guess is that showing his grief enhanced his ministry, and endeared him more to his followers.

***I'm thinking about what a difference it can make in our churches if we can just more honest about ourselves and more honest with each other.*** We all have struggles, don't we? I do.

Now a worship service is hardly the setting where we can open up and share the more private details of our life. This is one of the reasons why small groups are important in the church. They can provide a setting for people to open up, and find loving encouragement and support. But we can do some of that in our church meetings and classes.

Some years ago I learned about a ministry called Celebrate Recovery. It's a Christian based recovery program patterned after AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). It provides a weekly meeting where people can come and talk about their hurts and hangups and habits, and find freedom and hope. In one church we started a program. To initiate it, I preached a series of messages, and we had lay people share as part of the message. One young man spoke honestly of his past struggle with pornography. A lady in the congregation told how as a child she had been sexually abused. I was dumfounded. Working with them as leaders in the church I had no idea this was part of their past. And how God had brought healing to them. And I felt a new love and respect for sisters and brothers in Christ.

*The church ought to be a safe place where we can take off our masks and be ourselves, and be loved and accepted. Think of the healing this can bring!* Malcolm Boyd once said, "It is absurd when two masks say to one another, "I love you." It is very touching when two human faces look lovingly upon one another."

Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Peter's mask fell off that night. But the guilt and shame he experienced wasn't the end of the story.

Jesus used that as an opportunity to restore him and make him stronger. He can do the same for us.

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