

## **Introduction**

Spy movies and such frequently involve scenes of a masquerade ball or masquerade party. There are all kinds of storylines that can be achieved in a setting where people's identity is covered up. Melissa and I recently watched the old 1955 movie "To Catch a Thief." The climax of the drama took place right on the heels of a masquerade ball. Of course, one of the most well-known masquerades is the one included in the musical Phantom of the Opera. Masquerades originated in Venice Italy in the 15th century as elaborate dances for the upper class. But over time their popularity spread and because of anonymity masquerades brought people together from all classes. People seemed to enjoy pretending to be something they actually were not as they hid behind their masks.

Masks however are not only face coverings to conceal our identity. Figuratively speaking people often wear a sort of mask to disguise their persona or even their character. They manifest a pretense which conceals their true thoughts and motives. Among these are the chief priests and elders of the Jews in Jesus's day. They may have been able to fool the masses, but they were not able to hide their true identity from Jesus. In our text this morning he unmasks them and displays their hypocrisy.

[Read Text and Pray]

Hypocrisy is at the heart of this text. You won't find the word there but there is no mistaking its presence. In this encounter, the leaders of the Jews—the chief priests and elders—present a graphic illustration of the essence of hypocrisy. Jesus unmasks them and explains to them the ultimate danger of their duplicity. Hypocrisy will bar you from the kingdom of God. So the heart of the message this morning is to beware of the evil of hypocrisy.

## **I. The Manifestation of Hypocrisy.**

The temple grounds covered some 25 to 30 acres; so it was a huge complex. Jesus was here again where as a 12 year-old his understanding had amazed the teachers. Now he was the teacher. A couple days prior Jesus had entered the city on the donkey. Only a day or so before, he had cleared out the temple. People who were in town for the feast and had not already heard of Jesus were wanting to learn from him. Those among whom he had already ministered now wanted to learn more. No doubt he attracted quite a crowd. Among the crowd were the rulers of the temple and the chief leaders of the Jews, the chief priests and the elders of the people. These individuals were fully aware of the Nazarene whose works of healing were the talk of Judea. Emissaries from Jerusalem had come up to Galilee to check him out, and the Pharisees for some time now had been conspiring to destroy him. The consternation of the chief priests was now at a very high level since Jesus had so violently driven out the money changers and sellers of sacrifices, interfering with their money-making enterprise. At the same time here was this enormous influx of pilgrims who filled the streets of Jerusalem, and they held Jesus to be a prophet.

So the chief priests and elders approached Jesus. You can be sure it was not with kind intentions. They were not seeking to discover something they sincerely wanted to know. Like what happens so much in our day, especially with the press, these guys were looking for a "gotcha" statement. They wanted to hear something from Jesus they could use against him. Their question came from hearts of hypocrisy. They pretended to want to know, but really they wanted to destroy him. So they asked "by what authority are you doing these things?"

Jesus had made clear a number of times by what authority he performed his works and proclaimed his message. He had declared that he had come down from heaven, not to do his own will but to do the will of his Father. He spoke only the word his Father authorized him to speak. And Jesus could have said as much yet again to these leaders. But he knew their true motives; he knew their duplicitous nature; and he knew they were putting him to the test. So he chose rather to expose their hypocrisy for the surrounding crowds to behold. Jesus conditioned his answer of their question upon their answer to his. Jesus asked whether they considered the baptism of John from God. Was it from heaven or men?

"Uh-oh," said these men. We are in trouble if we answer truthfully. The people will be stirred up against us because they believe John was a prophet. On the other hand we cannot say it was from God because then Jesus will ask us why we did not believe. So together they decided to say they didn't know. The hypocrisy is abundantly clear. Truth was not what mattered to these men. What mattered was outcome, effect, impact. It is like what we have been seeing is true of the worldview of critical theory in our Wednesday evening studies. Critical theorists don't care about truth and don't care about ethics. What they care about is impact. That is why they burn cities and torch police cars and overturn statues. Likewise what mattered to the chief priests and elders was not the truth but the effect, and the effect they wanted was to maintain their power and place among the Jews. The question was not what is true but what serves us best. And it served them best not to answer Jesus's question, but simply to say "uh, we do not know." Anyone standing around could conclude that these guys were hypocrites. They were engaged in deception in order to give an impression that would keep them from looking bad.

Hypocrisy is as old as human sin. It is as old as Cain asking God whether he was his brother's keeper. The exhibition of the chief priests and elders presents a clear example of hypocrisy. It will be helpful, however, to build on their example with a fuller biblical definition. The Biblical Counseling database offers the following: "Hypocrisy is the claim or pretense of having standards, beliefs, qualities, opinions, virtues, and behaviors that one does not actually possess and claims salvation and spiritual maturity when they are actually void of these qualities. . . . A hypocrite is one who acts a false part, makes a false profession, and is a deceiver, imposter, and cheater."

There are a number of other biblical marks of hypocrisy.

- Hypocrites preach but do not practice.
- They see the speck in the eyes of others while ignoring the plank in their own.
- They are unwilling to see in themselves the very things for which they judge others.
- They honor with their lips but their hearts are far away.
- They look good on the outside but inside they are corrupt.
- They are insincere.
- They are quick to tell others what others need to do, but such things they themselves would not even think of doing.
- Outwardly they say, "Bless your heart!" but inwardly they curse you.
- They look religious and yet that is all it is, a look.
- They say they repent, but they never commit to change. They do not bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.

It should be clear that the sin of hypocrisy runs through us all. But its commonality does not excuse its seriousness. In a few weeks we are going to see how Jesus denounced the Jewish leaders, calling them out as hypocrites. And yet if we will turn from even this sin and confess it God will

remove it from us as far as the east is from the west. And that is exactly how far from us we should want hypocrisy to be.

## **II. The Explanation of Hypocrisy.**

Stories help explain things. They help us enter into a narrative with our emotions so that we obtain a clearer and better grasp of things. Think for example of how Nathan came to David after his sin with Bathsheba. The prophet presented a visual image of travesty. A rich man with many flocks and herds lived near a poor man who owned but a single ewe lamb. And that lamb became like a part of the family. When a traveler came to lodge with the rich man, he was unwilling to take from his own flock to provide a meal for him. Instead he took the poor man's lamb and roasted it for his guest. David's anger was greatly kindled. He told Nathan the man deserved to die and should pay back fourfold what he had taken. Nathan then said to David, "YOU are the man!" David was cut to the heart and said, "I have sinned against the Lord."

It was the custom of Jesus to make masterful use of stories and parables to effectively instruct and apply to the hearts of his listeners the truths he taught. And he did so on this occasion. He provided a simple story of two sons. Their father tells them both to go work in the vineyard. One son says he won't; the other with a respectful reply says he will. The first one changed his mind and went to work after all. The second son did not go work. "Which one did the will of his father?" Jesus asked. No hesitation here. The chief priests and elders said, "The first." They got it! When a father tells his son what to do, ultimately what matters is not what he says but what he does. And when it comes to God as Father, the one who does God's will is not the one who talks about it but the one who actually carries it out.

Which of these two sons epitomizes hypocrisy? Well, it is not the first one, is it? There was no pretense of desire to comply with his father's wishes. He did not want to. He was not polite or respectful. And he said he wouldn't. You know, this is every human being by nature. We are born with a bent against our father's will. And when we hear his commands, our hearts rage to do exactly what God tells we are not to do. Paul says, "The law tells me not to covet, but sin in me responds against the law and produces all kinds of covetousness." Whatever God's law says to me in my natural condition, my heart replies like the first son. It says, "I will not." And in fact, I do it not. By nature I fill my life with all manner of sin.

The first son's conduct is not commendable. It is despicable. It is a dishonor to his father. This parable helps us see something of the wickedness of human sin. Our creator who gives us life and breath tells us how we must live. It is for our good and for our joy. It is for our provision and our opportunity to honor God as God for his glory. But we say, "I don't think so. In fact, who are you to tell me what to do? I will not." This is Adam and Eve in the garden eating the fruit from the tree God prohibited. And it is you and me when we covet, when we hate, when we dishonor our parents, when we lust, when we steal, when we lie, and when we refuse to worship God and him only. By nature, "None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

But though the first son's conduct was not commendable, it was changeable. He changed his mind and went. He repented! Not only did he change his mind, he changed his action as well. I will not became I will. And he actually WENT into the vineyard to work. The first word Jesus began to preach was the word REPENT. To be converted to Christ, one must repent and believe in Christ. One must stop saying, "I will not," and begin saying "I will." One must turn his back on the evil of his prior refusal and must embrace the will of God. That is the question that mattered after this

story, and it is the issue that matters when one is confronted with his sin. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained that not everyone who SAYS to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." If you have been awakened to your sin and you desire to be forgiven, to be restored and reconciled to God, you need to repent. You need to change your mind from "I will not" to "I will." You must resolve in your mind and heart before God to obey and live for him right along side turning to trust in Jesus and his work to be forgiven and be reconciled to God. So while the first son does not epitomize hypocrisy, he does communicate to us the reality and importance of repentance.

It is in contrast to the first son that the second son depicts hypocrisy. You see, there is pretense with this son. He does not want to go work in the vineyard any more than his brother. Yet he politely and respectfully SAYS, "I go sir." He claims a disposition that he does not in fact possess. And the proof is that in the end, he does not in fact go into the vineyard." He does not do the will of his father.

There is a third son in this parable. He is not part of the story, but he is the one telling the story. The third son is Jesus himself. He is distinguished both from the first and the second son in the parable. Jesus is the one and only son who has said, "I go" AND who actually went. When God the Father said, "Son, go work in the vineyard," Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. He said, "I go," and he went. He always does what pleases his Father (John 8:29). Coming from God, he worked as none other ever worked. He lived in perfect obedience to the Father, and he died and rose to ransom sinners from death. Forgiveness of sin has been provided for all of us who said, "I will not." If we will but change our minds and put our faith in God's only Son, we have eternal life and do not come into condemnation but have passed out of death into life.

### **III. The Abomination of Hypocrisy.**

The answer given by the chief priests and elders to the question of Jesus was correct. The first son did the will of his father while the second did not. And Jesus turned their answer against them. This group of Jewish leaders because of their high station within Judaism considered themselves pleasing servants of God. They thought of themselves as loyal, respectful, obedient sons of God. But they were far from it. Clear evidence is that they did not believe the message of John the Baptist. They did not go out genuinely and sincerely to confess their sins. And they did not believe him as he heralded the coming of the Messiah. Even though the lowest of the low—tax collectors and prostitutes, people characterized by an "I will not" attitude—did believe. They changed their minds, and their lives were changed. And yet even when the chief priests and elders saw the change in them, these hypocrites refused to change their minds but persisted in unbelief. Abominable hypocrisy caused them to be standing in opposition to the Messiah himself.

Jesus' message to these guys is that their abominable hypocrisy will keep them out of the kingdom of heaven. If they are going to make it in, they are going to have to change their minds. They are going to have to repent. The bottom line is that religious claims or religious assumptions or religious positions do not qualify a person to enter God's kingdom. However, even the grossest sins will not keep a person out of God's kingdom, if he will repent of them and trust in Christ. Hypocrisy itself will not keep you out of God's kingdom if only you will repent of it. But you must see it and you must turn from it.

You know it is said by a substantial number of people that they have no interest in Christianity because the church is full of hypocrites. But that is in fact untrue. The true church is not full of hypocrites; rather, it is full of sinners. And to get into the church they have to acknowledge that they are sinners in need of a savior. The real hypocrites are those who are unwilling to admit their sin and unwilling to turn from it and follow Christ.

Part of the abomination of hypocrisy is that it is the exact opposite of God. The hypocrite son was the one who promised to go work in the vineyard but did not keep his promise. How great and glorious is our God that he is not a pretender. He is not a fake. He is not a phony. And his word is completely reliable. He never says he will and then he won't. What he says he does. What he promises he keeps.

As Solomon recognized, "Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise."

David said in Psalm 12:6-7, "The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times. You, O Lord will keep them."

Paul wrote to Titus, "God never lies." And Peter says, "God has granted to us his precious and very great promises." Praise God he is not a hypocrite. He is truthful and he is faithful.

Sadly, many times we are not. We make promises we do not keep. We sometimes for the sake of pride pretend to be something we are not. One of the marks of holiness is faithfulness and truthfulness. Even as we praise God for his faithfulness, let us despise the lack thereof in our own lives and put to death what remains of hypocrisy so as to effectively receive the pure milk of the word of God not being resistant to it.

### **Conclusion**

Wearing a mask might change the way you look, but it does not change your heart. You are who you are not who you pretend to be. Wearing a mask of religion won't make you right with God. But when a person changes their mind and changes their ways and repents of their natural inborn hostility toward God and resistance to his word, when that person embraces Jesus Christ in faith, it is not the putting on of a mask. It is a change of heart. It is authenticity that admits to sin. It is hypocrisy that denies it.

### **Prayer**

### **Benediction**

May the Lord who searches hearts and sees what is behind every mask bring us to genuine repentance and lead us to faithfulness that mirrors his own faithfulness to his people. A-men.