

LOOK AT THE FACE NOT THE MASK!

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chaps 8-9

Extracts:

And it came to pass... as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah [in exile in Babylon]... that the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there, ... and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north gate of the inner court, where the seat of the image of jealousy was, which provokes to jealousy... So I went in and saw ... seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel ... each man had a censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense went up.... And [the Lord God] said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols?" [Ezek. 8: 1, 3, 10, 11, 12]

On ABC TV's weekly comedy-drama, Ugly Betty, Betty Suarez is a young woman from a struggling Latino family who works as an executive assistant in a fashion magazine. She dresses cheaply and wears braces on her teeth all the time. She looks so ugly that even her womanizing boss hardly notices her. Her more attractive colleagues enjoy humiliating and insulting her. Yet, her inner glow overshadows her appearance. She is hard working and very helpful to others. She is determined and people are forced to see beyond her ugly look. The show premiered on American television only in September 2006. Already, it is a big hit and America Ferrera (who plays Betty Suarez) has just won the 2007 Golden Globe Award for best actress in a television series.

The lesson of ugly Betty is that what we see of people on the surface may not reflect their true inner self, that the hood does not make the monk. Therefore, Betty's ugliness is a mask which hides her inner beauty (her true face). The opposite can also happen. That is, some people may put up a beautiful outward front but inwardly, they are evil. Either way, the true self is inward, hardly outward where we put an iron mask. Look at your family, office, church, club or business. What do you see when you look at those around you? What do they see when they look at you? These and more are the issues that we shall address in today's lesson.

1. Unmasking the masquerade!

In traditional Africa, the masquerade was a central figure in maintaining social harmony. The elders told us that masquerades were spirit-beings who only came out on special occasions, such as during the new yam festival or when a hideous crime had been committed (which required prompt restitution). You could never question their decisions or actions because we were made to believe that they represented the spirits of our ancestors. Therefore, the worst abomination that any one could commit was to unmask a masquerade!

However, as we grew older ourselves, we began to discover some tricks of the elders. For example, we found out that masquerades were actually human beings like us who put on awe-inducing costumes that made us afraid. We also discovered that, far from being righteous, the masquerades were used by elders to settle scores with their enemies. The only painful thing was that we were not bold enough to disclose the true face of the masquerades to the younger ones. That way, evil was perpetuated from generation to generation. Yet, with education and Christianity, masquerades are now entertainers and we know the human beings behind them. So, their days of mischief are over. They have been unmasked!

In today's increasingly wicked world, we are facing a different set of masquerades. They come in the form of political or religious leaders, family or friends, guardians or mentors, and so on. They are in sports or music, palaces or prisons, campuses or shelters. They are in a position to influence us for good or for bad. In most cases, we may not know their true nature and some of us do not care. The danger, however, is that we could be placing at grave risk all that we cherish. For example, how would you have felt if you had been a member of a church in Florida where two priests stole almost US \$9 million in offerings and gifts over a period of forty years and used the loot to buy for themselves property and other assets?¹ Therefore, while we may not necessarily want to nose around to dig into the private lives of public figures, an occasional audit is good for our spiritual health, so that we can say with certainty that our trust is not misplaced. That was what God wanted the prophet Ezekiel to know about the elders and people of Israel who were purportedly worshipping God in the temple in Jerusalem whereas they were into something else.

2. God unmask the people's evil practices

The prophet Ezekiel was sitting by the River Chebar (in exile) with some elders of Judah when God showed him in visions what was going on in the temple in Jerusalem. It is conceivable that the elders in exile had been painting a romanticized picture of the home land to their young ones born in exile. They might have told them of the days of Solomon when the glory of God was a daily presence in the temple. The temple was still there and their story could have left

¹ "Cops: Priests fleeced Florida flock of millions,"
www.cnn.com/2006/LAW/09/28/priests.charged.ap/index.html

the impression that those left behind had continued with fervent worship of the true God as in Solomon's time. But God who does not see as human beings do, in that He looks at the heart, not physical features [1 Sam. 16: 7] needed to unmask the people's hypocrisy. He took Ezekiel in spirit and brought him to Jerusalem to see the abomination that the elders there paraded as worship of the true God.

In several visions, God showed the prophet the following evil practices going on in Jerusalem and Judah:

a) *Idolatry was present and unchecked*

At the door of the north gate of the inner court of the temple, there was "the seat of the image of jealousy... which provokes to jealousy," and the image was actually placed in the entrance of the altar gate [Ezek. 8: 3, 5]. God saw what the people were doing as an act to make Him go far away from His sanctuary [v. 6].

As God had told Moses when giving him the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image... for I am a jealous God" [Ex. 20: 3, 4, 5]. Therefore, anything that we make or do that we place ahead of God in His holy house is an image of jealousy. For example, imagine the amount of religious ostentation that is paraded as worship in the average modern church? Some people will cheat or bribe to seek or obtain higher ranks in the church so that they can wear large robes and sit in high places in the altar. Some church leaders buy air time to show testimonies of healing and other miracles which have come about more because of their prayers and intercession than by God's grace through Christ Jesus. What of the image of pride and arrogance or love of money that is threatening the spiritual growth of many ministries? For how much longer can we continue to push God out of His temple and still pretend that He is on the throne?

b) *And the elders tried hard to put a mask over the practice!*

God brought Ezekiel to the door of the court of the temple and told him to dig through a hole in the wall. The prophet saw "every sort of creeping thing, abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed all around the walls." Seventy elders of Israel, swinging incense burners, were raising thick clouds of smoke in worship. God said to Ezekiel, "Have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols?" [vv. 7-12].

Most denominations that I know have an abundant supply of deeply religious people. They attend church frequently (Sundays and weekdays), pay their tithes and vows and fulfill all the rituals of their church. They decorate the church and the altar with the best plants and flowers

available. They mount the best pictures/statutes of Jesus or the ruddiest crosses in strategic locations in the church or its premises. Yet, their fruits do not suggest a close relationship with Jesus. They fear and panic over little disruptions. They are in the front row in gossip and rumour mongering! They exhibit an unforgiving spirit. They may read the Bible for impression more than inspiration. Therefore, they are masking an inner lack of faith in the Lord. They are masking the fact that they have mistaken religion for a personal relationship with Jesus. This is the group that Jesus referred to when He said, quoting Isaiah, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, *but their heart is far from Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” [Matt. 15: 8-9].

c) *And their women were involved in sexually immoral cults*

The Lord brought Ezekiel to the north gate of the temple to “see greater abominations,” and to the prophet’s dismay, “women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz” [Ezek. 8: 13-14]. The Tammuz was an Akkadian vegetation- god that was associated with fertility and joy. It is the equivalent of the Greek god, Adonis.² As with all fertility gods worshipped by pagans, the Tammuz had temple prostitutes, mainly women, who engaged in sex orgies with priests and worshippers. In Ezekiel’s vision, women worshippers in the temple were said to be weeping for Tammuz. In other words, they were clamouring for promiscuous sex in God’s house!

Does that sound familiar to you? Have you not heard of young women who join churches (or the choir) mainly to seduce the pastors (or the choir masters) and derail their ministries? Some blasphemers’ interest in the promotion of Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* was the underlying portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a kind of temple “prostitute” for Jesus! Just as in the early Corinthian church where sexual immorality was widespread [1 Cor. 5: 9-13], the same problem is plaguing the modern church. The church may turn a blind eye to it or hush up its victims but, in the eyes of God, it remains an abomination.

d) *The elders ultimately turned their backs to God and true worship*

Having taken to idolatry and sexual immorality, thereby abandoning God, the people turned to something else. God brought Ezekiel to the inner court of the temple, between the porch and the altar, and showed him twenty-five men who had turned their backs to the temple and faced the east to worship the rising sun [Ezek. 8: 15-16]. In other words, they had substituted the natural light of the sun for the supernatural light of God.

² Micha F. Lindmans, “Tammuz,” *Encyclopedia Mythica*, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/t/tammuz.html>

In their search for enlightenment, people have experimented with transcendental meditation, such as *yoga*, without realizing its underlying pagan origin and satanic spiritual anchor. Some believers move from one denomination to the other looking for “powerful men of God” instead of looking for Jesus who is the Light of the world [**Jn 8: 12**]!

3. Why you must remove the mask

It was quite easy for the people of Israel (at home or in exile in Babylon) to blame God for their sufferings. To their young ones born in exile, that would be a logical thing to do. However, that was a hypocritical response. They had put up a mask to cover their unhealthy relationship with God. So, He opened Ezekiel’s *spiritual eyes* to see the people for who they were- unrepentant idolaters and sexual perverts. God put it to the prophet this way [**Ezek. 8: 17-18**]:

Is it a trivial thing to the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they commit here? For they have filled the land with violence; then they have returned to provoke Me to anger. In deed, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I will also act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.

If God were saying the same thing to the modern unrepentant sinner, He would put it something like this:

So, you think it is no big deal to sin against Me the way you do eh? You do all those terrible things and come into My holy house acting like saints whereas you only provoke Me to anger with your hypocrisy. You have turned My house of prayer into a business and a brothel. Instead of confessing your sins and amending your ways, you are covering things up. You are wearing a mask so that people cannot see your face. Don’t rub it in! No matter how thick may be your mask, I can see your face for what you truly are. I won’t tolerate it nor pity you any longer . If you like, you can cry to Me, to the high heavens, but I will not hear you!

Isn’t that a fearful thing to hear?

4. Conclusion: Let God see your face!

Some of us have worn the mask of hypocrisy and self-deceit for so long that we no longer feel safe without it! Yet, we know that our sins will surely bring us out [**Num. 32: 23**], especially at a most awkward moment. Happily, God remains merciful, in spite of our wickedness. For example, when God descended His judgment on Jerusalem, as shown to Ezekiel in the visions considered in today’s lesson, He commanded the executioners to “utterly slay old and young men,

maidens and little children and women” beginning at His sanctuary, but they were not to come near “any one on whom is the mark” [Ezek. 9: 4, 5, 6]. The mark was on the innocent and the repentant. God is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” [2 Pet. 3: 9].

So, stop deceiving yourself to think that you have no sin to confess or to persist in one. To do so is to wear a mask. That others cannot see your true self does not mean that God does not. You cannot continue to blame Satan because he has been defeated. Therefore, when he poses as an angel of light in your life [2 Cor. 11: 14], remind him that Jesus saw him fall like lightning from heaven [Lk 10: 18]. But if you confess your sins, God will forgive you and cleanse you of all unrighteousness [1 Jn 1: 9]. Thereafter, when God looks at you, He will see the face of His Son, Jesus, who has paid the price in order that you may win the prize.

Let go of that mask because it can never hide your face!