

The Mask of Hypocrisy

Romans 2:17-24 (need Haldane)

Not one of the 28 times that the Greek word ‘hypocrite’ is used in the New Testament is found here in Romans 2:17-24. But even though the word is not here, the mask of hypocrisy stares at us in these 8 verses.

The word ‘hypocrite’ was originally a good word, and described an actor, one who pretends to be a character for the amusement of others.

In Greek theater, women were not permitted to act; men played both male and female roles. And they often wore various masks as part of their performance.

But when play acting or putting on a false face is carried over to pretending to be religious or virtuous, then we have the more negative definition with which we are familiar, especially from the lips of our Savior himself, who 8 times in a row referred to the Scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites!

Paul is continuing to find the self-righteous guilty before the law in Romans 2, and here more specifically his Jewish kinsmen.

Paul had known himself what it was to confess to be blameless in the law, but at the same time, be a secret coveter in Romans 7.

That shows us there are two kinds of hypocrites – those who know it, and those who don’t!

We have seen already that the moralist sought refuge against God’s judgment in three ways: he heard the Word of God, he possessed the

Word of God and he especially condemned others who strayed from the Word.

Now Paul carries things further and deeper, touching on their boasting in the law and that they are instructors of everybody else. These ones have placed themselves at the front of the parade of moral and spiritual virtue! In other words, Paul expects that many such people would not yet have been persuaded of their need of a Savior for their sin, but would cling all the tighter to a false profession. So he presses on.

Our passage can be broken up into three parts:

1. The first and largest part is the Mask Described in 17-20. Here we find five and five – five boasts about themselves, and five boasts over other people.
2. The second section then sees the Mask Detached in 21-22, four descriptions of typical Jewish hypocrisy.
3. Then lastly in 23-24, two charges are made showing how the Mask Is Dangerous, both vertically before God and horizontally to men, in particular the Gentiles.

WE begin with the hypocritical Mask Described, that he has a good name, called a Jew; has a good guide – the law, or Torah, the instruction of God himself; boasts in God above, probably that he knows the Lord; and is furthermore guided by the Lord's will, along with being able to judge good and evil, to test the better from the best!

This is not a bad profession – there is nothing in his mouth here that is objectionable. He is calling himself after the 4th tribe of the sons of

Israel, Judah, which means praise. God, His Word, His Will, His Wisdom are all here professed.

And Paul does not jump in here and say that this is bad; not at all. These are good privileges indeed.

But he goes on and describes the Mask further in regard to his motions to other people. Before Paul said he judged others; here he says he instructs others. Being instructed himself, he instructs others – a guide to the blind, a light to those in the darkness of ignorance, a corrector of morals, folly, foolish living; and a teacher of the immature. That last phrase is his teacher's desk – having the embodiment of knowledge and truth in the Word, the Law.

So maybe some Jews had seen the error of just criticizing everyone else; so they looked to their own accomplishments, and still full of pride and self, make themselves out to be eagle-eyed, enlightened, educated, well established – the epitome of truth and knowledge.

These Jews remind us of the Christians in Laodicea, who thought they were rich, wealthy and in need of nothing, but in fact were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked!

Is there a problem here with God, with the Word, with wanting to instruct or lead others? No, not at all.

The Bible is the light to the blind, a lamp for our feet, instruction for the wayward, milk for the infant and meat for the strong.

But the problem is that while the Jew was a peculiar people, a knowing people, a teaching people, they missed the fact that they were a **lost** people.

The problem lies not with what they had, but what they did not have – **humility** to teach themselves.

This is the blinding nature of formalism, or externalism – people who are so close yet so far. They simply cannot see what they are missing because of the log of pride, arrogance, self-confidence in their eyes.

They do not have enough humility to turn the mirror of the Word on themselves.

As Jesus put it paradoxically in John 9, if they were blind, their sin would be taken away; but because they say they see, their sin remains!

This brings us to our second point 21-22. Here the pretty flowers of 17-20 are parted and beneath we find a rotting corpse! This heavenly angel falls into perdition before our eyes.

Listen to the powerful description of Robert Haldane on this matter as **the mask is now torn off**: p. 98

After considering the beautiful veil he asks:

“Who would not say that this is an angel arrayed in human form – a star detached from the sky and brought nearer to enlighten the earth? But observe what is concealed under this mask. It is a man who is himself untaught; it is a thief, an adulterer, a sacrilegious person – in one word, a wicked man, who continually dishonors God by the transgression of His law. Is it possible to imagine a contrast more monstrous than between these fair appearances and this awful reality?”

Are you less a thief merely because you teach against stealing in others?

Are you less an adulterer merely because you urge others to not sin sexually?

Are you less an idolater merely because you instruct to do the opposite while doing that very thing?

There is a brief question about what Paul means ‘robbing temples’. When did Jews rob from pagan temples?

This is a unclear matter. Might be this is in line with the sacrilege Jesus addressed –an idolatry of the heart. Paul is about to quote from Isaiah 52 regarding the time in captivity. God sent Israel out of the land as they had become as idolatrous as the rest of the nations. This cured them of physical idols of wood and stone; but it did not cure them of heart idols! They were still blind, deaf and dead as mentioned in Is. 6, and failed to see the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Now dear friends, lest you think this is only a Jewish problem, these lines are as relevant as ever – and even more so – now that we have the completed revelation of God, and the abundant life described in the New Covenant!

For if you call yourself a *Christian* – a *Presbyterian* even – an *ORTHODOX* Presbyterian – and you rest on your profession of a pure gospel of pure grace – a full five point Calvinist – boasting in the covenant of the Triune God!

You know the Lord’s beatitudes and approve all 9 of the fruit of the Spirit;

Being instructed out of the 27 books of the NT week after week –

Being confident that you are a guide to liberals, a light to the Roman Catholics, an instructor to Charismatics, a teacher of Arminians, having the shorter catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith – an accurate description of the truth of God Holy Word –

And yet you do not do the things that He says; you do not humble yourself as a little child and be converted; you do not repent and fight against sin, and deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him – well, we know those fearful words, don't we? 'Wait a minute, Lord, Lord? Why do you call me so? Depart from me...'

Verse 23 should be taken as part of Paul's conclusion and should be read as a statement and not a question: "You who boast in the Law, through your transgressing the Law, so you dishonor God."

These two last verses 23 and 24 bring us to the **third point** – the great damage done by such a hypocritical religion – first, to the Lord, who is dishonored, and second, to the Gentiles, who move to blasphemy, and third to themselves.

It has been the vertical relationship with the Lord that is the missing piece for this Jewish man. We should not be travelling very far down the road of godliness and righteousness before learning that God Himself is the chief end of our lives. But the Jews sought the praise that comes from below and not from above; from one another and not from the Lord of all!

Our Jesus spoke in no uncertain terms on this matter. He said that we cannot believe, cannot trust God aright, when we seek the glory that comes from man. "How can you believe?" he asks in John 5.44,

“when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?!”

This strikes at the heart of hypocrisy. In the classic work, Pilgrim’s Progress, we hear of man named Vain-Confidence, who walks with the Christians for a while, but does not come to heaven.

Bunyan describes him as a man aiming not at the Heavenly city itself of its King, but at the gates of heaven – just wanting to get in!

How many come to the gospel with only a mercenary spirit – some kind of fire insurance which cheapens the gospel.

Salvation is about knowing God, drawing near to Him, having Him as your All in All. And hasn’t He put that at the top of His list? At the top of the commandments – at the top of the Lord’s Prayer – at the top of the beatitudes in His kingdom of God?

Is God Himself, His very name, honored or dishonored by you? Is he blasphemed and mocked or commended and embraced because of your life?

This brings us to the damage to those around them – the unbelieving, idolatrous Jews being carted off to Babylon emboldened the Gentiles in two ways:

1. First, they thought their God was too weak to deliver them.
2. Second, they thought their God condoned the sins of His people.

When we openly sin with a profession of faith; when we are floating like a dead fish with the flow of the world – we feed the unbelief of the world. We say to the world that it really isn’t important how one lives, that God approves of transgressions, and that sin is just a normal

part of life. It is like a big billboard saying: “You don’t need to fear Sin!”

Thankfully it is never the church’s holiness that converts sinner, but the perfect holiness and glory of God.

For no matter how well or how poorly we walk with Jesus, it is Jesus the world despises. The church’s spots and wrinkles are only garnish.

But what danger we are in if our faith lets us continue in sin! We all know what it is like to have a confidence in something, only to feel your trust betrayed, and the rug pulled out from under you.

Paul knows so very well what his kinsmen are holding. He held the same. He was so committed to God, to the Bible, to righteousness, and yet all the time filled with pride, seeking his own praising, establishing his own righteousness, and persecuting the church.

Please know that this person then in Romans 2.17-24 is not a believer. This is not talking about those who trust in the Savior, who fight against such sins in their lives, even if a believer stumbles at times in these areas.

Thank God that Gospel never allows us to be at peace with sin!

But this does warn all.

It warns us of what Watson calls a squint eye. That is, when we are serving the Lord for sinister ends; for ourselves, for the praise of men, for some advantage.

And it warns us against what Watson calls the “good eye” – that is when there is a sin so dear to us, that we will not part with it; when we are found calling evil good, and looking on it as approved.

The approval of goodness is not the same as the love of goodness; and if we can love what is evil, if we can live for the flesh, and love the world, then the love of the Father is not in us.

Paul says later that those who live for the flesh will die!

Man’s nature and condition needs a radical change. And that change is just before us in the next section of Romans 2.

Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God!

Are you born again? Or are you just a moral person trying to be good enough for God? The Bible cannot be any clearer! There is none that is good – no, not one! Only Jesus is the Savior of sinners like us!

Amen? Amen!