

Masks Off

Romans 2:17-29

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 2, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

²⁵ Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶ So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

²⁸ A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God. (Romans 2:17-29, NIV)

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Labels can mislead, and it’s likely we’ve all been misled. Advertisers and marketers know this, and so it’s not uncommon to find a knock-off product dressed up with a label intended to deceive us. *KLG?* What’s the chances that it’s also “finger lickin’ good?” *Arm & Hatchet?* A household full of good uses? Sounds like a household full of terror! How about *Dave* soap? The current motto of *Dove* soap is, “Let’s change beauty.” What about you, *Dave*? What can you do for me? How

about *Sunbucks Coffee*? Yikes! That looks like a creature that eats mermaids. And finally, what was your first clue that these might not be actual *Nike Air Jordans*? I don’t ever remember Michael Jordan using that particular move when driving to the hoop. But what do I know?

You know this - what you see is not always what you get. The packaging tells you one thing, but once you look inside you find a whole different thing. And what can be true of consumer products can also be true of people. The word we use for such a person is “hypocrite,” a word that describes the person with misleading labels. The word comes from the ancient Greek word *hupokritēs*,¹ and it was first used in the world of Greek drama to describe an actor who performed on stage behind a mask. Actors in that time often played more than one role in the same drama, so they would indicate which role they were playing by holding different masks in front of their face. Even today the theater is symbolized by the twin masks of comedy and tragedy.

Many people have had the experience of meeting an actor who is famous for playing a certain role in film and television and discovering that in person the actor is nothing like the character they play on the screen. That’s the sign of a good actor, and this sort of mask-wearing in that profession is still honored. Particularly good mask-wearers receive Academy Awards. But outside of film and theater, we don’t give accolades to mask-wearers. When we come across somebody who pretends to be one thing on the outside to deceive us and cover up what is really on the inside, we use words like two-faced, imposter and fraud. All synonyms of “hypocrite,” and none of them compliments.

When hypocrisy exists among God’s people, it’s especially egregious. That is what Paul is addressing in this section of Romans. It’s an extremely relevant topic, because hypocrisy in the church is just as big a problem today as it was in Paul’s day, people identifying as followers of Jesus and putting on masks to get other people to *believe* they are followers of Jesus when what’s inside tells a whole other story. It’s all just misleading labels. One of the main charges against the church in our day by those outside the church has been that the

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/5273.htm>

church is full of hypocrites. It was American pastor D. James Kennedy who first responded to such critics by saying, “Well, there’s always room for one more!” He cautioned people that if they found the perfect church they should not join it because they would ruin it.²

But is that the best response we can offer, that we are all doomed to hypocrisy, and so people might as well just admit that what is true of us is also true of them, and then join us? I think we can do better. Paul is writing here to help us do better. And in his discussion on the problem of hypocrisy he helps us answer the following questions, which will serve as our outline this morning.

1. What is hypocrisy? (Which we already answered.)
2. Why are we so prone to hypocrisy?
3. What is the result of hypocrisy?
4. How do I tell if I’m a hypocrite?
5. How do we stop being hypocrites?

So next, *why are we so prone to hypocrisy?* Nobody I know aspires to be two-faced, to become the sort of person who hides their true self with masks meant to deceive. Hypocrites don’t start out wanting to be hypocrites. So how does it happen? Well, you might be surprised to learn that hypocrisy actually begins in a good place. Let me explain using an example from literature which Tim Keller cites in his book, *The Reason for God*.³

In Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Dr. Jekyll at some point comes to realize that he is a strange mixture of good and evil. He wants to be a good person, but his corrupt nature always leaves him well short of the mark. So he develops a special potion that will separate out his two natures. His hope is that his good nature, which comes out in the daytime, will set him free from his evil nature, which shows up at nighttime. If you know the story, you know it doesn’t work. When his evil side (i.e. Mr. Hyde) emerges after the sun goes down, it is far more evil than he anticipated. When he realizes this, he decides to clamp down on the terrible self-centeredness and pride he now knows is within himself. To do this, he resolves not to take any more potion and devotes himself to charity and good works in an effort to smother his selfish nature with acts of unselfishness. You might say he puts on a mask to try to cover what is truly inside.

But it all unravels one day when he’s sitting on a bench in Regents Park thinking about all the good he has been doing and how he is now a much better man, better

even than the majority of people he knows. And that’s when it hits him,

As I smiled, comparing myself with other men, comparing my active goodwill with the lazy cruelty of their neglect...at the very moment of that vain-glorious thought, a qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most dreadful shuddering...I looked down...I was once more Edward Hyde.

This is the beginning of the end as Dr. Jekyll chooses the only way out he knows, which is to take his own life. This is how Tim Keller explains Stevenson’s profound insight:

Like so many people, Jekyll knows he is a sinner, so he tries desperately to cover his sin with great piles of good works [i.e. masks]. Yet his efforts do not actually shrivel his pride and self-centeredness, they only aggravate it. They lead him to superiority, self-righteousness, pride and suddenly – look! Jekyll becomes Hyde, not in spite of his goodness, but because of his goodness.

It’s often said that pride and self-righteousness are the root of all sin. Nobody I know aspires to be full of pride. It’s part of the reason we so quickly and easily condemn it in others. And yet in doing so, we demonstrate our own pride. In the first verses of this passage Paul points out to his readers how they “**know the law and boast in God,**” and in turn then point out how others around them break the law. Yet in the end they do the very same things themselves. He has moved from the general and impersonal “you” which Laura talked about last week from the verses preceding these, to the very specific and personal “Jew,” putting his readers, at least his Jewish readers, now on the hook.

A little backstory here. Remember God’s purpose for Israel. All the way back in the beginning God chose Abraham and his family, who eventually became the nation of Israel, as his people and blessed them. But he made clear right at the outset that he chose them, gave them gifts like covenant, circumcision to be a sign of that covenant, and the law to help them live out their part of the covenant, essentially blessed them *so that* they would in turn be a blessing to all other nations.⁴ But what happens instead? The Old Testament chronicles their history of failing to do so. And by the time of Christ, these signs like circumcision, which were given as a reminder of blessing for the sake of being a blessing, had become empty signs. Think of how most

² Cited by R.C. Sproul, “Is the Church Full of Hypocrites?”, *Ligonier*, July 1, 2025. Read online at <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/church-full-hypocrites>

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 174–177.

⁴ See Genesis 12:1–3.

of the Jews treat the Gentiles in the Gospel accounts? Signs of blessing like circumcision had become instead external markers (insert “masks” here) used to separate out and exclude. Worse, the very Law they were using to condemn others was a law that they themselves failed to honor. Paul mentions several examples here, including stealing, adultery, and idol worship. Jesus, in his teaching, was constantly pointing out how so many of the Jewish leaders around him put on masks of godliness but, behind those masks, in their hearts where it really mattered, were opposed to godliness. At one point Jesus says bluntly to the religious leaders,

You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.⁵

So what's the result of all this? That's the next question we want to answer, and Paul answers it for us in verse 24: **“As it is written, ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’”** Paul is quoting Isaiah 52:5 here, with echoes from the prophet Ezekiel.⁶ Both prophets were critiquing Israel and their failure to be the light for the rest of the world which God intended them to be. It makes perfect sense then why the blaspheming of God’s name in the rest of the world would be one result of hypocrisy.

Imagine somebody tries to convince you to spend your hard-earned money on some product, but then you discover that the person pushing this product actually doesn’t even use the product himself because he doesn’t believe in it. Even if the product is in fact a good product, you are likely now inoculated against ever trying it because of the hypocrisy you have experienced. In a similar way, how many people in our day have encountered people in the church who claim the name of Christian but who, when others get to know them, are actually full of self-righteousness, legalism, bigotry, or worse. What’s the result of Christians who don’t practice what they preach? How many people in America today want nothing to do with Christianity because of the hypocrisy they have encountered in Christians?⁷

But a word of caution here. In naming this reality of hypocrisy in the church, it’s quite easy to start making a list of names that doesn’t include your own name. In doing so we set a trap for others and fall into it ourselves. Just like Dr. Jekyll, when we condemn the pride in others without doing so in ourselves we only fuel the pride we are trying to ignore. So let’s be honest. We all are prone to make the masks the most important thing, rather than the heart of the person who is hiding behind the mask. And we do this in two ways. First, we put on masks ourselves to try to convince others that we are better people than we really are. Second, we tend to judge others by what we see on the outside, even though we have no real knowledge of what is present on the inside. Like it or not, this is such a part of who we are that we barely notice when we are doing it.

So how do I tell if I’m a hypocrite? That’s our next question. In his book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, John Ortberg offers four questions to help us know if we are guilty of such hypocrisy.⁸ Ask them to yourself, and be brave enough to answer them honestly.

#1 – Am I spiritually ‘inauthentic’? In other words, are you overly preoccupied with how you appear to others, especially in terms of your Christian faith? Are you afraid to let others in the church know the truth about who you really are? Do you try and find ways to have people think you are more spiritual – whatever that means! – than you really are?

#2 – Am I becoming more judgmental or exclusive or proud? This is a problem for anybody who grows in their Christian faith. It’s a good thing if you grow in your knowledge of the Bible, or in your commitment to the church and its practices. But as you do, do you ever find yourself looking down on those who are not growing in similar ways? As you pursue godliness, do you ever wonder why others aren’t becoming as godly as you are?

#3 – Am I becoming more approachable, or less? Think of how sinners flocked to Jesus but avoided the overly-religious. When people outside the church learn you are a Christian, are they generally drawn to you, or do they start to keep their distance from you?

⁵ Matthew 23:27-28. This and all other biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

⁶ See Ezekiel 36:20, 22.

⁷ Dallas Willard once summed it up this way in *Spirit of the Disciplines*: “How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a

balanced vitality within the freedom of God’s loving rule... ‘Spirituality’ wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God. Think of the irony: spiritual life leading to lifelessness: Spiritual growth producing misery. A life supposedly yielded to God rebelling against him!”

⁸ John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 1997), 35-38.

#4 – *Am I measuring my spiritual life in superficial ways?*

If somebody asked you today, “How is your spiritual life going?”, what would come to mind? Would you think first of your attendance in worship, or how many mornings you have cracked open the Bible, or all the ways dedicate your time and money to God’s work? Those are good things, but are those the right barometers to use? Remember that famous passage in 1st Corinthians 13 where Paul says that the person who does all these things and more, but isn’t growing in love, is actually doing nothing of value.

I can’t answer these questions for you. I can answer them for myself. And when I do, it’s unavoidable. Without a doubt I have seen these tendencies in myself. Any honest person will say the same. Which leads to the final, and perhaps most important, question: *How do we get out?* Or, how do we make sure we stay out? That’s what Paul is addressing here in verses 25-29. His argument can be a bit confusing, so let me try to walk us through and bring clarity.

He first says that circumcision has value if you observe the law. It’s a way of saying that if what people see on the outside matches what is on the inside, then what is on the outside has value because it points to the truth. Think about it this way. I wear this ring as a sign of my commitment to my wife. Because I am, and have been, faithful to her, the ring has value. But if I wear the ring while I am cheating on my wife, the ring loses its value. In fact, it condemns me while it sits on my finger. The label on the package is useless if it doesn’t describe what’s in the package. So if we put on masks to pretend we are godly, while inside we are something entirely different, the masks are not just useless, but dangerous because, as we already stated, they inoculate people from God. Obviously, one of the masks the Jews of his day were putting on was circumcision.

Paul then makes a very interesting twist here when he starts talking about how some Gentiles, the so-called “uncircumcised” people, had begun to live in godly ways even though they didn’t have the traditional outward signs like circumcision that had been historically used to identify godly people. He says that we might as well consider them circumcised! He sums it up in verse 28 when he writes, **“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”**

This must have sounded wild to the Jews who first read this. How can an uncircumcised Gentile keep the law when a central part of the law itself is circumcision! Have you lost your mind, Paul?⁹ But to clarify, Paul isn’t just talking about any old Gentile. He tips his hand when he describes this person as one who has undergone a “circumcision of the heart” at the hands of the Holy Spirit. This may be strange language to us, but it would not have been strange for the Jews of Paul’s day. The Old Testament prophets spoke often about how God would one day require not only an outward, physical circumcision of his people, but an inward, spiritual circumcision, not just a cutting of the body but a cutting of the heart. In Deuteronomy 30:6 we read, **“The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”**¹⁰

What this means is that Paul here is talking specifically about Gentiles *who have become Christians*, who have placed their faith in Christ as Savior and Lord and have then had the Holy Spirit come to live within them and begin to empower them to live godly lives from the inside out. In his commentary on this passage, John Stott makes this all into two equations:

$$\text{circumcision} + \text{disobedience} = \text{uncircumcision}$$

but

$$\text{uncircumcision} + \text{obedience} = \text{circumcision}^{11}$$

Let me translate for us. Outward religious masks, no matter how impressive, do not make us what our inner lives show that we are actually not. On the flip side, people who have no outward religious masks, but have trusted Jesus and invited him to come to live in their lives to help them completely remodel things on the inside, those people are truly godly, or at least on the way to becoming so!

Herein is the very gospel itself. You see, the operating principle of self-righteous religion, which always leads eventually to hypocrisy, is that if we do all the right religious and moral things we will then be accepted by God. The motivation for obedience then becomes fear, because we dread the thought of being rejected by God and others. Fear is what motivated Dr. Jekyll to give every ounce of effort to showing himself to be a good person and not the person he knew he was inside, so that in the end he would could justify himself. But this

⁹ Of course, Paul hasn’t lost his mind. In fact, he says the same thing elsewhere in places like 1st Corinthians 7:19 – **“Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”**

¹⁰ See also Deuteronomy 10:16, Jeremiah 4:4, 31:33.

¹¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 93.

pathway always and only leads to one of two outcomes, either pride because we trick ourselves into thinking that we have indeed made Dr. Jekyll righteous, or despair because we come to realize that we can never get rid of Mr. Hyde.

But the operating principle of the gospel is the exact opposite. We discover that we are loved and accepted and forgiven by God in Christ even at the point when we are at our absolute worst. We are saved in spite of ourselves! Obedience then is not our *means* to salvation, *but our response to it!*¹² Now my motivation to live a godly life is not fear, but gratitude to the One who would give me such a priceless gift. And not only do I have gratitude to motivate me towards obedience, but, as Paul points out, the very Spirit of God is within me to provide the resources of grace to begin to obey. Beyond that, because my acceptance is not tied to my performance or goodness, I can rip off the masks and face my sin honestly. I don't have to hide it from God, and I don't have to hide it from you either. As Paul says at the end of this passage in verse 29, **“Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.”** The person like this who knows God's grace is the person full of confidence *and* humility. Confident because their acceptance is rooted not in their own goodness, but in the goodness of Christ. Humble because they know that acceptance is purely a gift, meaning that, as we sung earlier, if we boast we boast in Christ alone!¹³

Don't you see that hypocrisy has no place in the church because, for one, it makes no sense. If I truly come to know the grace of God in Christ, I can rip off the masks. I'm not threatened if you see the truth about Mr. Hyde in me, because you are not my judge and the one person who is my judge has died to declare me forgiven and beloved. My identity doesn't depend on what you think of me, so I don't have to pretend. Yes, I'm more sinful than you can probably even imagine. But I'm also more loved than I might ever dare hope. And the same is true of you, which changes everything about how I relate to you as well. Am I going to stop being judged by what you see on the outside of me, but then keep on judging you by what I see on the outside of you? Once I do, I'm back in that pitiful place where I started, and probably never really understood the meaning of God's grace in the first place!

All this makes me want to take issue with those who say that the church is full of hypocrites. Are there hypocrites in the church? Of course there are. And I've probably been one of them at some point. But I don't

want to focus much energy on making lists and attaching labels. Because in general, I think there are many other people in the church who, by God's grace, have come to recognize their deep need for God's grace. It's why in a few moments we are all going to line up and come eagerly to share in this feast of grace at the Lord's table. We know we need it!

Understand something - your sin does not make you a hypocrite. It's the *denial of your sin* that does that! If I know you are in Alcoholic's Anonymous, claiming that you are a recovering alcoholic, but then I see you stumble drunk out of a bar one night, are you a hypocrite? Not necessarily. You're in AA because you recognize that you're an alcoholic, because you realized you can't manage your drinking on your own. So in a way, I shouldn't be surprised to see you in such a state. Nobody kicks an addition like that overnight. And perhaps tomorrow you'll be back at another AA meeting talking openly about your failure the night before, and seeking help from fellow alcoholics.

Now, if years go by and the pattern persists over and over again, one night drunk and the next night confessing your drunkenness at AA, never changing, never any progress, I might begin to wonder about the sincerity of your desire to recover, and begin asking some legitimate questions about the masks you might be hiding behind.

This is a sermon for another day, but let me at least point out that the same is true in the Christian life. We will continue to struggle with sin. Right? The fruit of Christ's Spirit isn't formed in us in a day. No fruit is formed in a day! It's a lifelong struggle. But once you rip off the mask and surrender to Christ and his grace, you, as you cooperate with that grace, will find Christ slowly but surely formed in you from the inside out so that eventually the godliness, which is mostly about love, that people see on the outside will not be a mask, but a reflection of is genuinely inside, a heart that has been cut by the grace of God.¹⁴

Is the church a community of saints? Yes, it is. By God's grace through Christ, that is what we are. But we are also a community of recovering sinners. Aren't you tired of wearing masks? I know I am. The church is the one place in the world where we should be able to help one another, by the grace of Christ, take our masks off and begin to live, before one another and before a watching world, in absolute confidence and absolute humility. We boast, yes, but we boast in Christ alone!

¹² Romans 5:8 declares, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

¹³ I'm borrowing heavily from Tim Keller here, *The Reason for God*, 177.

¹⁴ We might, however, have legitimate questions about the person who never changes. And the first question we might have is whether or not they ever trusted Christ and came to know his grace in the first place.

All glory, all honor, all praise to Christ.

Amen.

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The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Romans 2:17-29 again. What stands out to you from this section of Romans?
2. How do you define hypocrisy?
3. Nobody aspires to be a hypocrite. So why are we so prone to hypocrisy, to putting on masks we hope will deceive people into thinking we are something other than what we truly are?
4. Do you think you can tell when you are in danger of hypocrisy in your life? How so? How are these questions helpful or unhelpful?
 - Am I personally inauthentic?
 - Am I becoming more judgmental exclusive or proud?
 - Am I becoming more approachable, or less?
 - Am I measuring my spiritual life in superficial ways?
5. What do you think would happen if you decided to rip off all your masks in church? What would happen if we all did the same thing?
6. Paul talks about having a “circumcised heart.” What does that even mean? Do you think that has happened to you?
7. What would it take for you to live free from what others think about you, and only concern yourself with what the Lord thinks of you? Is this even possible?
8. What is the main thing that Christ is saying to you through this message? How will that change the way you think or live?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Why do we bring an offering when we come to worship? How does our family decide what it is we are going to bring? Are we offering more than money?