

May 25 - Masks

There is something fascinating that happens when I meet people. We will be talking and then the conversation turns toward what I do for a living. As soon as the question is asked, I know what is about to happen. The moment I say that I am a parish pastor, everything changes. From that point on, the conversation will be around religious or theological themes. It may be apologetic about why the person doesn’t “go to church as often as I should.” It may turn to pastoral care. Almost every time, it changes the way the other person speaks. They start using what they imagine are “church words” and everything is pretty superficial moving forward.

Peter does the same thing in this situation. He has been having an authentic interaction with the people in Antioch. This would have been largely with those who would be seen as Gentiles. Peter knew that in Christ we are all siblings. Then, he finds out that people from James have shown up in Antioch. It never says why they are there. Peter makes an assumption that anything he does or says will be relayed to the church in Jerusalem. He changes his behavior. He “cleans” it up.

It is hard to blame him. We as humans do this sort of thing all the time. Maybe it is a supervisor walking through the plant. Maybe it is the company safety coordinator walking through. Maybe it is the police officer that pulls onto the road behind you. Suddenly you are aware of every rule, and you follow it as closely as you can. In that last example, the hands go on “10 and 2” and you are very aware that the Speed Limit is not a Speed Guideline.

The point Paul is making is this: Either continue to live by the law or choose grace. You cannot go back and forth depending on who is around. He uses the word “Hypocrite.” This is a word from the theater. It is a word used to describe the various masks that an actor would use to play the various roles within a production. If you are changing your behavior depending on who you are around, what is authentic? Who is the real you? Who are the people around you? How do you know if someone is a Christian?

That last question takes up more bandwidth that we would like to admit. Peter wanted others to know that he was a good and faithful follower of Christ. For him, it meant observance of purity rules. What does that look like for us? Is it the mark of Baptism? Is it attendance? Is it wearing a cross? Is it how you vote, or what you post? Is it about how you dress, or how you carry yourself? Is it about language? Whether we like to admit it or not, there is often this subconscious tally that looks at markers like these. We start to rate others. I believe this stems from our own insecurities about ourselves and the faith needed to believe God would love a person like me.

We build up this image of what a Christian should look and act like. It is all an illusion. It makes me think of the quote by the late evangelist Billy Sunday. He said “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you an automobile.” He is absolutely right. Being a Christian is not about what we do. It is about what Christ has done. There are only two qualifications for being a Christian.

First, you need to be a sinner. You cannot be perfect. If you are perfect, you are in and do not need Christ to pave the way for you. If any of you are perfect, talk to your friends and family. You may be surprised at what you learn.

The second, is to place you trust in the faithfulness of God. It is not our own faith that gets us through, or that saves us. It is the faithfulness of God. Our own faith will go through ups and downs. That is life. We place our faith and trust in God, who has conquered sin and death through Christ our Lord. Through that, nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. So, be yourself, knowing that God loves you. Amen.

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