

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY[®]



*Beyond the
Masquerade*

unveiling the authentic you

Dr. Julianna Slattery

To live authentic, honest lives takes immense courage and humility. Juli opens our hearts to this kind of scandalous living, being willing to look honestly at our pain, our profound brokenness, and our need for God's amazing grace and mercy—which is, as she so beautifully portrays, the only kind of living that matters.

Tammy Maltby

Author of *Confessions of a Good Christian Girl*
and *Lifegiving*

Cohost of the Emmy-nominated television
show *Aspiring Women*

In *Beyond the Masquerade* Dr. Julianna Slattery will skillfully and gently guide you into “unveiling the authentic you.” She’ll help you understand why your self-worth, self-concept, and self-confidence can only be real if they are rooted and grounded in a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. You will learn why positive thinking by itself just isn’t enough.

If you are tired of wearing a mask, tired of trying to change, and if you are ready to actually do it, keep reading. You will be amazed at the changes and the freedom you will gain through Jesus Christ alone!

Dr. Bob Barnes

President, Sheridan House Family Ministries

There is nothing more frightening yet freeing than unmasking. Yet women continue to live in loneliness because the fear overshadows the freedom. Julianna Slattery hits the nail on the head when she talks about the brokenness required for the journey to wholeness. Our *Midday Connection* mailbox is stuffed with letters from women who want true community but don’t know

how to get there. Want a real roadmap? Read *Beyond the Masquerade*. Better yet, read it together with a small group of women. You'll never be the same.

Anita Lustrea

Host and executive producer, *Midday Connection*

Many voices in today's culture claim that low self-esteem is at the root of every emotional and relational struggle we face. But Juli Slattery argues that we must completely rethink our definition of self-esteem, focusing instead on the true Source of value and purpose in life. Juli brings great wisdom, insight, and biblical understanding to this often-misunderstood topic. She also writes as a trusted friend, sharing openly and honestly from the secret places of her own heart.

If you long to be known, loved, and accepted for who you truly are, you will find freedom and hope in the pages of this book!

Dr. Bill Maier

Vice-president and Psychologist in Residence

Focus on the Family

The background of the page is a light gray color with a pattern of overlapping, hand-drawn circles and lines. The lines are thin and vary in opacity, creating a sense of depth and movement. The circles are of various sizes and are scattered across the page, some overlapping each other. The overall effect is a subtle, artistic pattern that frames the central text.

BEYOND THE MASQUERADE



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, IL

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

*Beyond the
Masquerade*

unveiling the authentic you



Dr. Julianna Slattery

Beyond the Masquerade
Copyright © 2007 by Julianna Slattery, Psy.D.
All rights reserved. International copyright secured.

A Focus on the Family book published by
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CO 80995.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (HCSB) are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible. © copyright 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Scripture quotations marked (MSG) are taken from The Message (paraphrase). Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®. © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org). Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Reader's Version®. Copyright © 1996, 1998 by International Bible Society. All rights reserved throughout the world. Used by permission of International Bible Society. Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The case examples presented in this book are fictional composites based on the author's clinical experience with hundreds of clients throughout the years. Any resemblance between these fictional characters and actual persons is coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of Focus on the Family.

Editor: Kathy Davis
Cover design by: Jennifer Ghionzoli
Cover photograph of mask © by Joy Fera/iStockphoto. All rights reserved.
Cover photograph of woman © by Creatas Images/Alamy. All rights reserved.
Author photograph © by Jim Maguire

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Slattery, Julianna, 1969-

Beyond the masquerade : unveiling the authentic you / Julianna Slattery.
p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58997-377-0

ISBN-10: 1-58997-377-1

1. Self-esteem—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Integrity—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4598.24.S53 2007

248.4—dc22

2007003028

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 / 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1 Welcome to the Masquerade!	5
2 Seeing Beyond Reality	27
3 Self-Worth: The Beginning or the End?	47
4 Self-Concept: True Lies	71
5 Self-Confidence: Just the Tip of the Iceberg	91
6 Wholeness Requires Brokenness	113
7 Humility Transforms Relationships	135
8 More Than a Job	157
9 This Is My Story . . . This Is My Song	177
Notes	189

Introduction

The best way to begin writing a nonfiction book is probably to lay out what you want to teach the reader. After all, why write unless you have something profound to impart? Although this was only my third venture as an author, I knew from the beginning that this book would be different. Rather than writing a message that I wanted to teach, I wrote about a lesson that I desperately needed to learn.

As you read this book, you'll quickly realize that I'm not an "expert" so much as someone who is walking alongside you. After all, my credentials are just another form of hiding in the "Masquerade." I'm more convinced than ever that God's truth, wisdom, and power shine through our weaknesses far greater than through our strengths. It's only when we're lacking that we're driven to our knees to seek Him.

I've spent my life in the evangelical church. Although my heritage is a tremendous blessing, I also realize how crippled the Western church is. So many of our efforts to reach and please God are strangled in an obsession with self. The problem isn't a new one. The demon of pride has taken on many different faces throughout the history of humankind. However, this present danger is tenfold because we fail to recognize it as a problem.

The gospel of John records Jesus' teaching on how God prunes our branches so that we might bear more fruit.¹ I always understood this as referring to how God cuts away the bad things in our lives: lust, gossip, materialism, foul language—they

all have to be discarded. Now I understand that God also prunes away branches that may actually look good and fruitful to us. Many things I once considered “spiritual” I now see as hindering my dependence on Him.

Ambition, family, popularity, busyness, friendliness, success, self-confidence, perfectionism—these are good things that can make our Christian lives fruitful. After all, we reach neighbors by hosting parties in our perfect homes. We impress educators by flawlessly teaching our children. We build beautiful churches with the money we’ve earned through our hard work. We may even raise well-behaved children and maintain intimate marriages. However, we’re continually at risk of placing trust in what we do—even in what we believe we’re doing for God.

In the quiet of the night, I hear the question, *Juli, are you serving Me or am I serving you? Who is glorified through the good things you do?*

There are no “10 steps” to pure motives and authenticity. Authenticity isn’t a goal we can achieve through effort but rather something that pursues us as we surrender more to the King. I can’t promise that this will be an easy book to read. It wasn’t easy to write. However, I can promise that when God prunes away “good” branches, it’s always to make way for something far more fruitful.

God’s pruning usually feels painful—sometimes even crippling. It seems crazy to ask for His discipline in our lives. Yet, be encouraged by the words of Hebrews 12:10–13:

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but

painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Does your soul yearn for more of God? Although you fear the pain of His pruning, do you long to share in His holiness? Journey with me as He first shows us how “lame” we are in our own strength and then heals us with the power of His love and truth.

Your sister in Christ,
Juli

What is most wrong in us is least visible to us.

—DR. LARRY CRABB

1

Welcome to the Masquerade!

Perhaps your morning was like mine. I reluctantly rolled out of bed, feeling the impact of a late night. After stumbling into the bathroom, I groped for the light switch and was rewarded with a brightness that was far too intense for Monday morning. I splashed water on my face and began to brush my teeth. While brushing, I stared at the dark circles under my eyes, chuckled at my wayward hair, and noticed a large red pimple forming on the left side of my nose. Next, I stripped off my clothes, turned on the shower, and stepped on the scale. *Not too bad given my weekend indulgences*, I thought. How a number can determine the tone of my day!

After showering, the real work began. Deodorant, baby powder, mouthwash, and perfume to control offensive odors. Blow-dryer, comb, and styling gel to tame my hair. The face—now that was the ultimate challenge. Since this would be a workday involving human interaction with others beyond my children, I decided on the “medium-level makeover.” I started

by spreading moisturizer on my face and neck and tweezing stray eyebrow hairs. Next, I applied under-eye concealer, blemish concealer, blush, and powder. I carefully employed eyeliner and mascara to highlight my sunken brown eyes. With a lip pencil, I outlined my bottom lip, literally drew an upper lip since I have none, and then filled it all in with glittering ruby lipstick. After trying on three pairs of dress slacks, I found one that fit comfortably, projected casual professionalism, and matched an ironed blouse. I looked at myself in the mirror and declared myself presentable.

Amazing what it takes to get ready to face the world. Imagine going to church, work, or lunch with a friend simply as you are—no shower, hair matted, no makeup or deodorant. I've had those days—have you? Running late with no time or energy for personal hygiene? Even if it's a quick trip to the grocery store, I'm acutely aware of my disheveled appearance, and I feel completely unprepared for personal interaction.

My 30-minute morning routine is well worth the time and effort. In its natural state, my body stinks, my breath reeks, my skin is blotchy, I have bushy eyebrows and hairy underarms, my lips are too small, and my stomach is too flabby. Wrinkles, gray hair, and varicose veins are just starting to appear, foreshadowing my future decline. Frankly, in this world I need all the cosmetic help I can get.

Although I may not be aware of it, I usually put even more effort, time, and energy into making myself emotionally and relationally presentable. Facing others without covering my psychological blemishes is actually more terrifying than going out into the world without a shower or makeup. Far more offen-

sive than body odor are my fears, malicious thoughts, insecurities, shame, and pride.

Imagine if everyone could see through your smile, scripted words, and confident appearance. What if your boss, your friends, your neighbors, your relatives, the grocery clerk, and your children could peer into your soul and know the depth of who you *really* are—the good, the bad, and the ugly? Perhaps even more threatening, what if you lived with the daily, moment-to-moment awareness of your own deepest pain, shame, and insecurity? Such intimacy, such honesty, such nakedness, such consciousness would be paralyzing. Have you ever felt it? Who has the strength and courage to live so genuinely? Is it even possible?

TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE HIDING

The Phantom of the Opera is one of Broadway's greatest musicals. The play tells the story of a brilliant composer with terrible facial deformities. Throughout his childhood, he was mocked and rejected. As an adult, he developed his genius as a musician and an architect, posing as a ghost who haunts an opera theater. When the Phantom falls in love with one of the young opera singers, the only way he knows how to win her affection is through hypnosis, intimidation, and manipulation. As the story of unrequited love unfolds, the Phantom reveals his life of loneliness and agony. His first piece of clothing as an infant was a mask to hide his horrendous appearance. He was born to be hidden.¹

Can you relate to the Phantom? When were you first fitted

for a mask? Although you may have been loved and adored as a baby, it probably didn't take long before your "deformities" entered the scene. Do you remember when you were first aware of not being okay, when you first realized that just being you wasn't enough? At what point did the stains of human sin and shame become your reality?

When Kendra was only two, her mother abandoned her. Kendra lived with her father, who soon remarried and had three more children with Kendra's stepmother. Although they loved Kendra, she always felt like the odd one out. She was the child who had been rejected by her own mother.

Because Kendra's family was poor, she drew taunts and slurs from classmates at school. As a result, she began to care about her appearance and went to great lengths to play the part of a popular, normal child. She dreamed of the day when she could leave her history behind and build a life that others would respect.

Years later, as an established professional, Kendra came to counseling complaining about the emptiness of her life. A successful businesswoman and active church member, Kendra knows how to impress others with her credentials and vivacious personality. Yet she still has nights when she sobs into her pillow, asking God, "Why didn't my mother love me?"

Even her closest friends don't know about the inadequacies that have haunted Kendra throughout her life. How can she risk further rejection by admitting the humiliation of her past? Instead of dwelling on these fears and heartaches, Kendra forges ahead in her strengths, the acceptable version of who she has become.

You don't have to have a dark secret or a tragedy in your

past, like Kendra, to feel the sting of shame and a fragile self-image. If you've experienced such rejection, you are simply more in touch with the true human condition. *Regardless of your heritage and history, you were destined to wear a mask since the day of your birth. You entered this world with deep needs that could never be fully met because you were created for a relationship that was severed through sin.* Although God designed you for fellowship with Him, you were born on the Enemy's turf, alienated from the very purpose of your being. You bear the image of a righteous Creator but fail at every level to participate in the fellowship and the glory for which He designed you.

And so, as a young child, you learned to survive by wearing masks. This is the way of the world: You must do something great, be friendly, follow the rules, make others laugh, have a quiver full of children, be extremely talented, be highly educated, or look beautiful in order to be a person of value.

Based on your background, natural talents, and personality, you created a mask that seems to fit you so perfectly that most of the time you aren't even aware of its presence. Seldom, if ever, have you realized how drastically it cripples your fellowship with God or your intimacy with others. Your mask feels as much a part of you as your own skin. It is simply who you've become.

In the 1980s, a film called *The Breakfast Club* captured the attention of pop culture. Although the movie earned an R rating, youth workers within prominent churches and Christian organizations were urged to see it because of its effective portrayal of humanity. The story takes place at a suburban high school on a Saturday during detention. The film brilliantly captures the struggle for identity among five students who serve the daylong

detention together. The cheerleader, the jock, the punk, the rebel, and the geek begin the morning at odds and with nothing in common. But as they share throughout the day, they learn how similar they truly are. As the day wears on, they in turn divulge their fears, pain, and feelings of rejection. The rebel tells about his abusive father, and the jock explains his pressure to succeed. They are each fighting for a place in a lonely, callous world. Each has assumed an identity—a mask—for survival.²

Perhaps you remember this vivid struggle for identity as a teenager. It was probably during these tumultuous years that you settled on how you would define yourself. Was it based on looks? Boyfriends? Grades? Sports? Parties? Money? Clothes? Talents? Or did you leave high school still lost? Perhaps you defined yourself not by what you could do but by what you couldn't do. Stupid. Ugly. Rejected. Ordinary.

Although you probably no longer feel that raw insecurity of adolescence, the pain and the questions may lurk just below your “mature” adult identity. Adulthood feels more secure only because you've grown more comfortable and confident in your mask.

Nothing holds both the potential to heal us more completely or wound us more deeply than simply being genuine. The hope of healing awakens the deep desire to be fully known and valued. This longing sometimes triumphs over fear and prompts us to take risks, to be vulnerable. But that honesty and nakedness alerts us to real dangers. Only when we're truly ourselves can we be utterly rejected.

All of us have experienced the hurt of sharing too much and having our trust met with betrayal. Yet we also know the lone-

liness of tucking away secrets and stuffing feelings. Our lives hang in the balance of this choice: to risk being known or to hide behind the safety of a role, a facade, an identity. So goes the struggle of who we are, who we pretend to be, and how we hide. You may hide so well that you aren't even aware of what you're doing. But since the fall of Eve, to be human is to be hiding.

WHAT'S AVAILABLE AT THE COSTUME SHOP

*I have heard of your paintings too, well enough;
God has given you one face,
and you make yourselves another.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

Perhaps a quick browse through common masks will help you recognize how deeply entrenched our culture is in this masquerade. Here are several that women hide behind:

- Jamie is protected by her armor of accomplishments, possessions, and power. Her travel schedule, luxury car, Palm Pilot, and never-silent cell phone proclaim her importance. People are impressed when they find out how quickly she has risen in the business world. Few ever think to look behind her success and get to know the real Jamie.
- Kate is the neighborhood's supermom. Kids are always playing at her house. Her minivan sports her children's honor-roll stickers. Kate's schedule is packed with sporting events, Moms In Touch, field trips, homework, cooking, laundry, and cleaning. As long as her children



are developing well, Kate is assured that her life is meaningful. What could be more important than building the next generation?

- Shauna hides on her college campus. Gone are her insecure high-school days; she has grown in her confidence. She's earning a 3.6 GPA at a prestigious university and is surrounded by friends and male admirers. Seldom does Shauna give voice to the loneliness of her soul.
- If you have a problem, call Karen. She's the best friend a woman could ever have. Karen never says no and would do anything for someone in need. She lives to be needed. Who she is beyond that, not even Karen knows.
- Vicky is one tough lady. She knows how to get things done, but don't get in her way. Vicky has no qualms about telling you exactly what she thinks. Her motto is "If the truth hurts, too bad." Vicky's aggressive and blunt style serves to keep others at arm's length. No one dares to get close enough to know the real Vicky.
- Are you throwing a party? Kelly should be first on your list. If Kelly can't make it, reschedule, because she's the queen of fun. Always armed with entertaining jokes and stories, Kelly is a blast to be around. She's loud, friendly, and can make even the shyest person feel welcomed. Her charisma and charm will make you forget that although you've known her for years, you still have no idea who she is.

Where do you fit in? How have you crafted your life into an identity? Are you a perfectionist, a peacemaker, a know-it-all, a socialite, a beauty queen, an introvert, or a helpless victim? Do

you realize how powerfully your struggle for acceptance and meaning defines you? Your days are packed with work, relationships, duties, and leisure. But to what end?

But wait, you may be thinking. Maybe what you're talking about is just my personality. How do I know if I'm wearing a mask or if I'm just being myself?

Heather was always eager to volunteer for projects at church and her children's school. Although her husband sometimes complained that the family was overcommitted, Heather genuinely believed that her service was an expression of her personality rather than a mask. However, as she delved deeper into the issue of self-esteem, she began to realize that being available and helpful were primarily her way of gaining attention and friendship. Her insecurities faded into the background as others applauded her servant heart.

After praying about this for a couple of weeks, Heather decided to "fast" from volunteering for six months. She was amazed at how difficult it was to say no and let other people down. She began to feel useless and doubted her worth in the body of Christ. She wondered if people would still appreciate and value her as a person rather than as someone who could be trusted to complete a task. In the absence of busyness, she discovered how threatening it felt to call a friend just to have coffee with her. Without a mutual project to work on, what would they talk about? How much of herself would she have to reveal?

Like Heather's, your mask likely emanates from your personality traits, strengths, and past experiences. God created you with a unique temperament and approach to the world. Don't confuse that uniqueness with your mask, although they may

appear to overlap. A genuine characteristic becomes a mask when you use it to hide or protect yourself rather than to express the real you. Authenticity displays who you truly are while masks manipulate that truth, presenting a more favorable or guarded image.

Your mask is the established pattern for how you interact with the world. It filters how you see yourself, understand others, and solve problems. Most likely this coping style is productive, and even helpful, in many life circumstances. However, the protection your mask provides comes with a steep price, one you may not even know you're paying!

THE GOING PRICE OF A MASK

The price of your mask may be evident only when something goes wrong—a divorce, the loss of your job, the death of a loved one, a financial crisis, the rejection of a close friend, infertility, a threatening illness, a wayward child. When your mask cracks, you realize how empty life feels, how vulnerable your very existence is. Like the man who built his house upon the sand, the waves and the wind erode the foundation of who you are.³ Only then are you aware of how compromised your life has become by hiding.

Your Mask Prevents You from Experiencing Intimacy with God

Our relationship with God is absolutely dependent upon how we understand ourselves before Him. Throughout Scripture we see examples of people approaching God on their own terms, comfortable in their masks. Perhaps in that moment of aware-

ness, their motives felt pure and their desires seemed to be set on pleasing God. Only as third-person observers can we see how lost they were in their pursuits.

Certainly the most obvious example of these kinds of people were the religious leaders of Jesus' time. The Pharisees had tremendous authority and were treated with great respect in their community. They were the most educated and came from the most prestigious Jewish families. When Jesus came onto the scene, He threatened their masks by inviting sinners and common people to serve God. He exposed the Pharisees' facade of righteousness by pointing out the evil in their hearts. Even under the guise of spiritual leadership, they worshiped their masks rather than recognizing the true God. They chose to kill the source of truth in order to preserve the illusion of their righteousness.

If you're a student of the New Testament, you probably view the Pharisees as the bad guys of the Bible. Less obvious is the fact that we, too, are in danger of sharing their foolishness. The lesson of the Pharisees is that we must never approach God based on our strengths. Our talents, good behavior, knowledge of Scripture, and devotion to God cannot make us worthy in God's eyes. We're strong only when we're willing to be weak. We will embrace God only when we're truly humble, dependent, and childlike before Him. We desperately need Him!

The book of Mark tells of an encounter Jesus had with a rich young ruler. This young man probably was born into the right family, was intelligent, knew the Scriptures, and was a God seeker. He came to Jesus, presented his résumé, and waited to be praised as a worthy disciple. Instead of saying, "Good job,"

Jesus hit this guy square between the eyes: “Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor. . . . Then come, follow me.”⁴ Intimacy with God is impossible when we approach Him with the facade of a mask.

Notice that Jesus *never* dealt with people based on what they could offer Him. His followers were those who were willing to admit how lost and sick they truly were. Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”⁵

How often do we try to put our best foot forward when approaching God? For example, just think about the Sunday-morning church routine. If you’re like me, the “Sunday-morning scramble” probably looks something like this: All morning while getting ready to “worship,” you run around the house yelling at your kids and fuming at your husband. Then, because you left 10 minutes late, the car ride is filled with silent tension or flat-out arguing. But as soon as you pull into the parking lot, you remind the kids to paint on their smiling faces and behave in “God’s house.” Finally, your “happy family” emerges from the car, wearing their Sunday best.

Who are we fooling? Is this how God really wants us to approach worship? God isn’t impressed with our talent, beautiful clothes, or well-behaved children. He longs for an honest, intimate relationship with us characterized by dependence on Him.

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. . . . For we do not have a high

priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”⁶

Your Mask Prevents You from Pleasing God

How might your life be different if you truly didn't care what other people thought about you; if their opinions, judgments, and gossip held absolutely no weight? Consider John the Baptist, the greatest man to ever live, according to Jesus. John had this freedom. He dressed weird, lived in the desert, and preached a very unpopular message. He was completely unconcerned with the earthly consequences of his spiritual calling.

Although God probably won't call you and me to eat locusts and wear burlap, He does call us to the same kind of devotion to Him. Children of the King should have no regard for the world's opinion of them. In fact, the Bible tells us that because the world hated Jesus, it will hate us as well, so we should expect to be persecuted when we identify with Him.⁷

But that's easier said than done. This world has such a strong hold on us. We long for the approval and praise of others, and our masks are designed to help us gain that approval.

Cindy is a typical Christian wife and mother with a couple of school-aged children. Each day, she spends most of her energy packing lunches, doing laundry, helping with homework, and driving her kids to various sporting activities. Cindy finds great fulfillment in taking care of her husband and children. Her kids are well behaved, get good grades at school, and

usually get along with each other. The family lives in a modest suburban house and attends the local community church on Sundays. So what's the problem?

Maybe nothing, maybe everything. We can be going through the motions of what a Christian woman is "supposed to do" without ever pleasing God. Many of the good things we do are ultimately rooted in the safety and accolades of living up to the world's expectations, not in serving the Lord.

Although our masks may be effective and applauded by society, they set our hearts on pleasing people. It's impossible to seek the approval of both God and the world at the same time. *Every thought we have, every word we utter, every motive in our hearts is either intent upon pleasing God or serving our pride.* James 4:4 says it plainly: "Friendship with the world is hatred toward God."

How often I try to walk the line with one foot in this world. I do care what people think! Honestly, I'm often far more concerned with establishing my identity on earth than I am with becoming a disciple of my Savior. Second Chronicles 16:9 says that God searches the earth to find a heart that is fully committed to Him so that He may strengthen it. To be servants of the King, we must renounce our identity in this world. "For am I now trying to win the favor of people, or God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ."⁸

Your Mask Prevents You from Experiencing Intimacy in Relationships

Sue and Jessica are having lunch together, catching up on their families and recent events. After they share about potty-training

progress and kindergarten teachers, their conversation drifts toward a mutual friend.

“Have you talked to Emily lately?” Sue asks.

“No,” replies Jessica. “We’ve kind of drifted apart recently. Whenever I’m with her, I feel like she’s judging me.”

“I feel the same way. She expects everyone else to be able to run a house like she does. I’m glad she homeschools her four children, but some of us have real jobs and need to earn real money.”

“I feel really bad for her,” Jessica observes. “She alienates everyone. No one really likes to be around her because she’s so perfect.”

And so their conversation continues. After two hours of heartfelt sharing, the two hug and make plans to meet again in a month.

How typical is this of the relationships women have? Our banter, cloaked in a facade of Christian “love,” is often centered on tearing down and outdoing one another. More often than not, our conversations are really two masks talking to each other—proving their worth—rather than two individuals connecting.

This problem isn’t limited to girlfriends. Most marriages suffer from the same malady. One spouse is the peacemaker; the other, the achiever. One loves the limelight while the other is content to drift in the shadows.

Often, a couple like Jim and Brenda comes into counseling complaining that they just can’t communicate. As I listen to them discuss their problems, I can’t help but notice the repetition. Like a warmed-over sitcom, week after week they sit in my office having the same conversation, reading from the same

script. Whether Jim and Brenda are talking about the septic tank, Jim Junior's T-ball game, or the family's Christmas plans, they end up at the same place. Jim is always Mr. Fix-It with the quick solution to every problem. Brenda is the nitpicker, ready with 10 reasons why Jim's solution is inadequate. After listening to his wife belittle him, Jim throws up his hands in frustration and exclaims, "I don't care what you do. You take care of it."

The *issues* Jim and Brenda discuss aren't really what impeded their intimacy. They can never connect because they don't know how to reach for each other outside of their masks. In the midst of arguing, they never express genuine feelings like "I'm scared," "I'm hurt," or "I'm really sorry." After more than a decade of marriage, neither really knows what exists behind the scripts they so skillfully recite.

Few husbands and wives know how to touch each other's souls. They've settled for a cheap imitation of intimacy, his mask clanging against hers.

Another distressing consequence of a mask is how it distorts parenting. Instead of mirroring God's relationship with His children, parents love and value their kids based on performance or how well they wear a mask. The family superstar is easier to love than the child who struggles with everything. Instead of brotherly love, sibling rivalry flares as children try to win their parents' admiration and attention.

Love and unity are among the most common themes in the New Testament. You wouldn't guess it from looking at the state of the local church or even our own families. Can you imagine if the church really acted as a body? Can you envision having a pure love for every person you know? Jesus said, "A new com-

mand I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”⁹

Honestly, this command seems impossible to live out. How it must sicken the heart of God to see His children playing the Devil’s game, calling it Christian love. We will never honor Christ as members of His body until we recognize the lies we believe and ditch the masks.

I was in my mid-20s when I first began to recognize the prominence of my masks. If anyone’s family was functional, it was mine. I grew up with two wonderful, loving Christian parents. Yet even in this environment, I felt the desperate need for approval. My universe revolved around my parents’ praise. As a young child, I was intent on earning good grades, winning athletic competitions, and behaving perfectly. At the slightest sign of a parent’s or teacher’s disapproval, I would melt into tears. My parents would reassure me of their love and tell me that winning awards and earning perfect grades made no difference. But I didn’t believe them. As one of six children, I wanted to be special. I wanted to make them uniquely proud of me.

This attitude naturally transferred into my relationship with God. If being one of six was difficult, how could I be special as one of billions of God’s children? How could I get God’s attention? How could I be sure that He loved and noticed me among so many others? I read Paul’s words to the Corinthians about running the race to win,¹⁰ and I determined to run the race of life to win—to be the best.

I remember thinking as a young child, *I want to make a mark on this world for God*. If you heard a 10-year-old girl say that, you

might be impressed. Well, people were. They applauded and encouraged me to develop my gifts to do just that. Then I got a glimpse of what I was really doing: using standards of spirituality and achievement to establish myself before God. I didn't want to make a mark *for* God. I wanted to make a mark *for myself* before God. There's a profound difference between the two.

As my walk with Christ deepens and the Holy Spirit reveals more of my heart, I'm astounded at the depth of my hiding. I want my children to look good, I want others to admire me and be impressed with what I do, and I rather like hiding behind my busyness and credentials. As I ask God to change my heart, I must be honest about how even the good I do is driven by futile efforts to prove something, to get God's attention, to outdo a colleague, or to control my destiny. My righteousness is truly like "filthy rags."¹¹

The struggle doesn't stop even in church. While praising God, I watch the worship leaders, mentally critiquing what they wear and how animated they are as they sing. I look around to see who is in church, which sets off all sorts of selfish and malicious thinking. *God, I pray, why can't I even worship You free of this sinful struggle? Why are my thoughts so bound to the survival of ego and human acceptance?* I know I'm sick and that I'm surrounded by sickness. We all look so secure and healthy behind our masks. But we're in need of the Physician who can heal with truth in love.

Nothing hinders my walk with Christ more than this battle that rages within me. Even the things I do for God easily become warped ways of distinguishing myself among other

people. When will I want God more than I want what He can do for me?

I believe that no single issue more greatly affects our lives than that of self-esteem. It begins in early childhood and flares violently in adolescence. Although in adulthood the question of self-image appears to be settled, inwardly it rages, hijacking emotions, motives, and beliefs. Our approach to friendship, worship, health, money, work, marriage, parenting, leisure, sexuality, accomplishment, forgiveness, service, witnessing, temptation, and appearance is profoundly affected by our self-esteem. *To the extent that our self-image is skewed by the world, we fail to walk based on God's truth in every aspect of our lives.*

Our Savior died not only to free us from hell but also to liberate us from the bondage that keeps us ineffective on earth. He has invited each of us to uniquely participate in His glory. But Satan has so tied us up in knots about our doubts, shame, insecurity, and pride that we waste our lives playing his irrelevant games.

I pray that through this book, you'll discover how your search for self-esteem can either drive you toward God or away from Him. I pray that God will open your eyes to the ways you hide and will open your heart to His unconditional love and worth. By discovering your destiny and design in Christ, may you learn to walk in the confidence of His truth. I pray that this work will reflect His Word, which is able to transform your thoughts, relationships, and motives.

O Lord, we want the freedom that You died to give us! We want to be free to praise You as Your bride. We want to honor You without a thought of impressing others. We want to fellowship with and

serve others without a hint of competition, jealousy, or suspicion. We want to proclaim Your name without the fear of what others will think about us. We want to tell how we were blind but now we see through Your amazing grace.

This is the freedom we seek beyond the masquerade.

*Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.*

—PSALM 51:6



Questions for Reflection

1. “To be human is to be hiding.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
2. What masks do you wear? How do your masks overlap with your personality?
3. When do you remember feeling inadequate or unworthy growing up? How might your mask have developed out of that experience?
4. How has wearing a mask interfered with your relationship with God? How has it compromised your significant relationships with others?