

Christians Take Off Your Mask!

If we truly want the character of Christ, we must expose our weaknesses, shed our hypocrisy and stop pretending. God calls us to BE TRANSPARENT.

Many years ago when my first daughter, Sharon, was about 4 years old and my second daughter, Lorraine, was 2, I became upset with my late father-in-law because of his negligence in organizing his blood pressure medicines. He had a habit of putting them on the floor. I reminded him many times, but he would remember for a week or two and then forget again.

One night as I was washing the dishes after dinner, I looked over the kitchen counter at the medicines scattered on the carpet and got really angry. I was concerned about the children's welfare. What if they ate the medicine? What if they got sick? But I didn't say a word.

Suddenly, Sharon looked at me from the sofa and asked, "Daddy, why are you mad at Grandpa?" Not knowing what to say, I kept quiet.

But my father-in-law, who happened to be standing next to my wife, turned to my daughter and said, "Sharon, Daddy is not mad at me. Why did you say that?"

She affirmed her statement with a smile saying, "Yes, Grandpa, Daddy is mad at you." I was dumbfounded. Though I had tried to mask my anger by remaining silent, my daughter had discerned the condition of my heart.

This incident confirmed to me how much our hearts matter to God. He is more interested in what's on the inside than in what we do or say.

In our modern age, however, we have the tendency to focus more on the outward than on the inward. We welcome what is artificial and deceptive with regard to our outward appearance. In essence, we spend a lot of money trying to mask the real "us." And many of the things we do, we do out of a wrong motive.

We smile cheerfully because our boss says that if we don't, we will be fired. We greet our customers professionally because we want to get the deal. We prioritize leadership over servanthood, so we are more concerned about looking elegant and demonstrating our authority than being a blessing to others.

We become involved in certain types of ministry only as a steppingstone to our ultimate goal. We use, misuse and abuse people for our own gain. We want to go up, but we don't ever want to come down-to humble ourselves. We chase increase, abundance, glamour, success, and name and fame so that we look good on the outside at the expense of our inward man.

But the Lord made it clear that the outside is not what matters to Him when He told Samuel: "'Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'" (1 , NKJV). Samuel was in the process of determining which son of Jesse God wanted to become king of Israel, and Samuel was tempted to use criteria other than God's to make the choice.

The Bible tells us that when Solomon built the temple, he laid the foundation with "large stones, costly stones, and hewn stones" (1 Kin. 5:17). Apparently he wanted the foundation to be the best, even though no one would see it.

If we were builders, we would be more likely to use regular stone to construct the foundation, as long as it was strong. We probably would not spend extra money on costly stones for

something that would not be seen. But Solomon was different. The foundation was important to him.

It is just as important to God. God is building a spiritual house, and we are the spiritual stones He is building it with (see 1 Pet.2:5). He puts a lot of emphasis on the heart and the mind, which are invisible to the natural eyes. Why? Because when they are renewed, these invisible things will transform our attitudes, habits and character and lead us into our destiny. He is preparing us from the inside out.

First the Natural, Then the Spiritual

When I was young I learned kung fu (a Chinese martial art). The first several months I came for practice, my teacher instructed me to draw water from a well with a pail. I did it over and over again for hours. Then he asked me to sweep the floor of his large cement backyard in certain ways as he instructed. When I got tired, he told me to go home.

Every time I came to see him he asked me to do the same things. After several months I became angry because I didn't go there to learn how to draw water from a well with a pail or to sweep his floor; I went to learn kung fu.

One day when I was particularly frustrated my kung fu master unexpectedly threw a punch at me. Out of reflex my one hand blocked his blow, while the other hand automatically prepared to take action. Both of my feet remained firmly planted.

In that moment I saw that the very things that had frustrated me were teaching me the basics of hand and foot coordination. I was learning kung fu, but I didn't know it. The master then told me that he had been watching my attitude and the degree to which I would submit and obey when he asked me to do things I did not understand. After I had passed those "tests," he taught me the things I wanted to learn.

He said, "Skills without character will bring self-damage; the

basics are important.” When we master the basics, our responses become reflexes-controlled, automatic reactions to the enemy’s attack.

God is the best instructor and teacher. The Bible says He will instruct us and teach us in the way we should go; He will guide us with His eye (see). He allows us to go through situations in our lives to humble us, to reveal what is in our hearts and to test us, to see whether we will keep His commandments or not (see Deut. 8:2). He knows that in the fight against Satan we must have the basics down so that our feet will remain planted. The state of our inward man-our character-will help to determine whether we are able to maintain this stance.

The Bible says that the thief comes to steal, kill and destroy (see John 10:10). He always looks for an opportune time. What will our reflex be when that happens? If we live our lives based on outward strength, then when challenges come it won’t be automatic for us to go to our inward man to defend our character, principles and values.

When Moses faced challenges from the people of Israel, his automatic response was to go back to the Lord. That made him meek. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, He replied with a quote from the Scriptures, saying, “It is written.” That made Him strong. When Paul and Silas were imprisoned after being beaten, they responded by giving thanks and singing praise to God. That made them victorious. All these men reacted to the enemy’s attack based on the strong spiritual foundation in their hearts.

The apostle Paul understood that character is not determined by external characteristics. He wrote, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 , emphasis added).

He makes it clear that maturity doesn't have anything to do with our age, size, height or looks; but it has a lot to do with our hearts. It is the result of yielding ourselves to and gladly obeying the Holy Spirit so that we can put away the reasoning, thoughts and speech of a child. Maturity is not judged by outward criteria or by what we do, but by who we are on the inside-the real us.

Start on the Inside

Unfortunately, we are living in a culture that teaches the outside-in approach to maturation. That's why many people get stuck in victim mode. They blame their parents, spouse, kids, boss, circumstances, and anyone or anything else to get out of taking responsibility for their own messes.

God's way for us to develop character is to start with ourselves; it's an inside-out approach. The Lord is calling us into a deeper relationship with Him so He can show us our weaknesses and build a strong foundation in our inward man.

When Jesus was addressing the people in His Sermon on the Mount, He revealed the significance of what is in the heart. He told them it wasn't enough to obey the commandments or cultural laws and traditions; they had to go deeper.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say unto you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart”(Matt.5:27-28, emphasis added).

“You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I tell you not to resist an evil person”(Matt.5:38-39, emphasis added).

“You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute

you'” (Matt.5:43-44, emphasis added).

God will make you go deeper than “what you have heard in the past.” Whatever you have heard in the past may hinder you from going forward because the Lord is saying to you right now, “But I say unto you.”

Now is the time to take off your mask because God wants to develop your character and shape you to fulfill your destiny. It's not something you can do on our own; it is the work of the Holy Spirit in you. But you can cooperate with God by putting yourself in a position to be transformed. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I have someone I'm accountable to other than God?
- Do I have someone who can speak into my life? Can I be totally honest and transparent with this person, and can I accept correction with an open heart and mind?
- When someone hurts me, do I forgive him and allow God to avenge me, or do I become bitter and retaliate?
- When I forgive someone who has wronged me, do I release him and continue to love him as before or put him on a probation period?
- Do I rejoice in my “enemy's” tragedy?
- Men: Do I look at women with lust or fantasy in my heart?
- Women: Do I dress to entice men with my physical appearance?
- Do I use my outward appearance as a “cover” or “mask” out of insecurity?

If your answers let you know your heart is not in the condition God wants it to be, go to Him now, just as you are. You don't need to hide behind a mask. He is interested in you. He loves you and wants to set you free from any condemnation-and from the bondage of your sin.

Remember, Jesus came to seek not the righteous, but sinners! He said it is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick. His grace is sufficient for you. As God completes His work in you, you will begin to reflect not a false image of yourself, but the character of His Son.

Paul Tan is senior pastor of Los Angeles City Blessing Churches, based in Claremont, California, and the apostle of a network of primarily Indonesian churches in the United States, Canada, Europe and Indonesia. For more information, log on at .