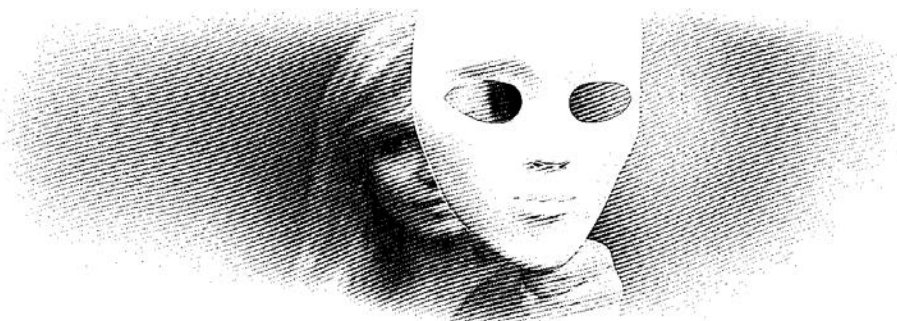


Behind the Mask



SABBATH—FEBRUARY 28

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Proverbs 25:2, 3; Proverbs 26:11, 12; 1 Corinthians 1:20, 21; Proverbs 26:13–16; Proverbs 27:5, 6.

MEMORY VERSE: “Don’t [do not] brag in front of the king. Don’t [do not] claim a place among great people” (Proverbs 25:6, NlrV).

BEHIND THE DAZZLING (BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL) SERPENT UPON THE TREE IS SATAN, WHO SPEAKS SWEET WORDS AND WHO SEEMS SO CONCERNED WITH EVE'S HAPPINESS. He is planning her death (Genesis 3:1–6). Pretending to be “an angel of light,” Satan prepares the most dangerous traps for humans (2 Corinthians 11:14). Even more dangerous and deceitful is pretending to be what we are not. But we end up cheating others and even ourselves.

There are different ways to deceive. One of the most common is through language. Some of the proverbs this week deal with words—lying words, flattering words, pretty words. They are the words that use nice sounds and wonderful feelings to cover ugly thoughts and plans. We need to be careful about what we say to others and how we interpret what others say to us. Perhaps this week's message could be said this way: “‘I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. So be wise as snakes and as harmless as doves’” (Matthew 10:16, NlrV).

THE MYSTERY OF GOD (Proverbs 25:2, 3)

DEFINITIONS

1. physics—the science that studies matter (things, substances, or materials that are invisible to the eye) such as molecules, atoms, and energy.

Life is full of mysteries. Scientist David Deutsch wrote that “everyday events become complicated [hard to understand] when physics¹ is used to explain them. If you fill a kettle with water and switch it on, all the world’s supercomputers could not solve the equations [numbers; math problems] that figure out what all those water molecules will do. Even if we could somehow figure out their original condition and all the outside influences on them, it still would be an impossible job.”—Adapted from David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity [Having No End]: Explanations That Transform the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), page 107.

If we are puzzled about something as “simple” as water molecules, how could we even expect to understand the mysteries of God?

Read Proverbs 25:2, 3. What point is the author making? And how can we use it in everyday situations?

What makes the glory (great power and beauty) of God different from the glory of kings is His “mysterious” nature. So, this suggests our human inability to fully understand Him. Our word *mystery* comes from the Hebrew root *str* (“conceal”; “hide”). This Hebrew word is often used in the Hebrew Scriptures (Bible) to explain what makes God the only true God (Isaiah 45:14, 15). There are things about God that we simply cannot understand. On the other hand, part of what makes great kings glorious (worthy of praise) is that they are willing to have their actions questioned by others. Being responsible to others for one’s actions should be the first requirement of leadership (Deuteronomy 17:14–20). It is the king’s duty to “search out a matter” (Proverbs 25:2, NKJV). This means giving an explanation for events and for what he is doing.

Life is full of unanswered questions. In a split second, common events can mean the difference between life and death. Some people go from one tragic or sad event to another. But others do fine. All this should tell us that we need to live by faith. What things are happening right now in your life that you have to accept by faith, trusting in God? What other choice do you have?

THE FOOL AS WISE (Proverbs 26:11, 12)

Some people argue that truth means different things to different people and that it may be “stretched.” For example, what is true for one person, or one culture, might not be true for another. But for others, someone else’s belief is for them a dangerous error, especially in religious matters. Certain things are right and others are wrong, no matter where we live or what our personal choices are. In the end we must always surrender our views to the Word of God and the truths found there. God’s Word must be our final test for knowing right and wrong, good and evil.

Read Proverbs 26:11, 12. (Read also Judges 21:25; 1 Corinthians 1:20, 21; 1 Corinthians 2:6, 7; and 2 Corinthians 1:12.) What must we all be careful not to do?

As we can see, this idea of doing what is right in one’s own eyes is nothing new. But it was as wrong then as it is now. None of us really understands everything. In fact, we do not fully understand *anything*. We all have areas where we need to grow and learn. So, we should always be open to the fact that we do not have all the answers.

In the case of fools, we need to be concerned that the influence of their foolishness will go beyond themselves. They believe strongly in their wisdom. So, they will keep on doing foolishness. Others may believe that such fools are wise. And they will honor the fools, and ask them for advice. This can lead to big problems (Proverbs 26:8). Foolishness will spread. But when it has the label “wisdom” on it, it can be that much more damaging. What is more, fools are so foolish that they do not know of their foolishness.

How often are you tempted to give up on what you know are basic truths? What happens when basic values do not seem to agree with each other? How can we know which ones we should believe in?



God’s Word must be our final test for knowing right and wrong.

THE SLUGGARD (LAZY PERSON) (Proverbs 26:15)

“A person who doesn’t [does not] want to work leaves his hand in the dish. He acts as if he is too tired to bring it back up to his mouth” (Proverbs 26:15, NIV).

Some students may spend more time and energy preparing to cheat on an exam than studying for it. The same is true for lazy people, who work hard to find excuses for their laziness!

Read Proverbs 26:13–16. What are we being warned about here?

The lazy person may be right: “ ‘There is a lion in the road!’ ” (Proverbs 26:13, NKJV). So, it is wiser to stay at home and not to struggle with the danger. But by doing just that, we miss all the opportunities that life offers. We will never enjoy the beauty of the rose if we do not run the risk of being hurt by its thorns.

Think about some of the other symbols (word-pictures) in those verses. For example, verse 14 describes the door swinging on its hinges, but it does not go anywhere. In the same way, lazy people turn in their beds. In other words, they just change position but do not go anywhere either.

The other symbol, in verse 15, is more shocking. Lazy people can get their hands into a dish of food. *But they are too lazy to bring their hands back to feed themselves!*

But even worse is their laziness to use their brains, their closed-mindedness, and their strong belief in their own positions. So, they think they are always right. And they will not be open to other ideas and opinions perhaps wiser than their own. Those who think they have all the answers usually do not.

“In the judgment men will not be judged because they sincerely believed a lie. But they are judged because they did not believe the truth. They also are judged because they neglected the opportunity of learning what is truth.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Leaders and Forefathers] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 55. How do we understand our duty in giving others the “opportunity” to learn what is truth? Where does our responsibility begin, and where does it end?



The lazy person may be right: “There is a lion in the road!” And that is his excuse for staying home.

But by doing so, he misses opportunities that life offers.



We will never enjoy the beauty of the rose if we do not run the risk of being hurt by its thorns.

THE FRIEND AS ENEMY (Proverbs 27:5, 6)

Suppose we are more disappointed by our friends than by our enemies. This is often because we expect good from our friends and evil from our enemies. But it does not always work out that way. That is why Proverbs warns us that sometimes a friend behaves like an enemy and an enemy like a friend.

Read Proverbs 27:5, 6. When can rebuke (correction) be a sign of love?

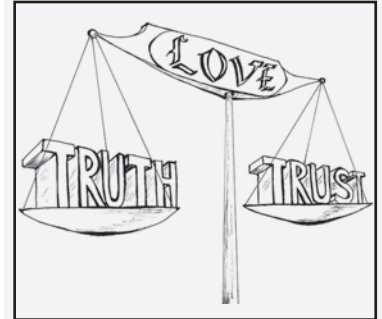
Love is not just about kisses and sweet words. Love will sometimes drive us to rebuke (correct) our friend or our child. And it can run the risk of appearing unpleasant, judgmental, or critical. We might even lose friends if we speak out. But if we do not warn our friends about what they are doing, then what kind of friend are we?

Open rebuke is also a sign that our love is not built on false ideas. Instead, it is based on truth and on trust.

Read Proverbs 27:17. What can be the result of quarreling (fighting; arguing) between friends?

The symbol (word-picture) of iron sharpening iron suggests a benefit for both parties (persons). Friendship tested by caring correction will improve the friendship and strengthen both persons. Both persons will become better. We will end up better prepared for our future struggles. People who overprotect themselves and listen to their own ideas only, and never face the challenge of different ideas, will not grow in knowledge or in character (thought; feelings; actions).

Have you ever received correction for something that could have really hurt you? Suppose you had not been warned about it? If you realize that you need to rebuke (correct) someone else, how can you do it in a helpful and positive way instead of in a judgmental or critical way?



Love is not just kisses and sweet words but is built on truth and trust.

THE ENEMY AS FRIEND (Proverbs 26:17–23)

Read Proverbs 26:17–23. Write down the main ideas found in these verses.

Proverbs tells us about the power of words. This time it deals with the harm caused by lies and arguing. People who lie about your enemy before your face want you to think they are on your side. But they are really like “charcoal.” They feed the quarrel and lead you into the fire of more troubles (verse 21, NKJV).

“Warm words,” which sound so smooth, can hide an “evil heart” (verse 23, NIV). The politician who wants to be elected, the salesman who wants to sell his things, or the playboy who wants to seduce (tempt or lead to do what is wrong) a woman—they all know about the power of smooth talk!

These verses teach that we should be careful not to believe in every nice speech we hear. Such speeches can be dangerous because they are “nice.” Some people are very good speakers. They can seem so sincere and caring, when inside, something completely different is going on. We have all been deceived by people who have been guilty of doing the same thing. They say one thing to a person but think or feel something completely different. Proverbs speaks strongly against this kind of lying.

“Everything that Christians do should be as transparent [open and clear] as the sunlight. Truth is of God. All kinds of lying are of Satan. . . . It is not an easy thing to speak the exact truth. We cannot speak the truth if we do not know the full truth. How often first impressions [unclear ideas], wrong opinions, imperfect knowledge, and wrong judgment prevent a right understanding of matters! We cannot speak the truth if our minds are not guided by God who is truth.”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Reflecting Christ*, page 71.

How open and clear are you in what you say? How much of a disconnect (no connection) is there between your words and your thoughts? Do you really think that such lying can be kept up for a long, long time? (Read Matthew 10:26, 27.)

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “The leading of the Spirit of God does not remove from us the need to use our brains and talents. Instead, the Spirit teaches us how to use every power to the glory [praise] of God. Human minds, when under the special leading of God, can be used for the best purpose on earth. Limited knowledge does not make a follower of Christ more humble or spiritual. The truths of God’s Word can be best understood by an educated Christian. Christ can be given glory best by those who serve Him with true wisdom. The great goal of education is to help us use the power which God has given us to teach the Bible wisely and promote the glory of God correctly.

“We owe a debt to Him who gave us life and the talents to be used for the gospel work. It is our duty to develop and improve these talents. We owe this to our Creator.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, pages 361, 362.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Discuss more about the mysteries that we find in everyday life, such as in nature, in human fellowships, or in questions about faith and the nature of God and salvation. It is odd but true that the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. Why is that even more true when it comes to spiritual truths?
- 2 What are some “truths” that are cultural or changing? How do we tell them from truths that are eternal, universal, and unchanging? Why is it important that we know the difference between them? Why can it be dangerous if we cannot tell the difference?
- 3 It has been said that smart people keep their friends close and their enemies closer. What does that mean? As Christians, how are we to deal with this idea? In what way can Matthew 10:16 help?