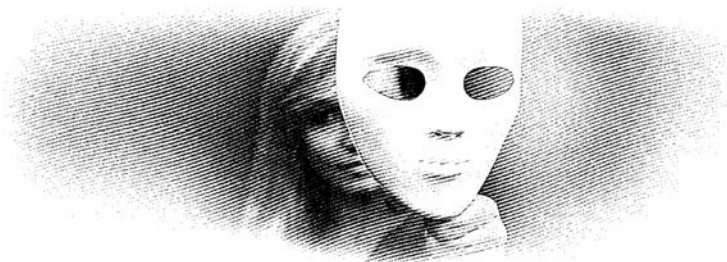


# Behind *the* Mask



---

## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Prov. 25:2, 3; 26:11, 12; 1 Cor. 1:20, 21; Prov. 26:13–16; 27:5, 6.*

**Memory Text:** “Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of the great” (*Proverbs 25:6, NKJV*).

Behind the dazzling serpent, who utters sweet words and who seems so concerned with Eve's happiness, hides the enemy who plots her death (*Gen. 3:1–6*). Disguised as “an angel of light,” Satan prepares the most dangerous traps for humankind (*2 Cor. 11:14*). Even more dangerous and deceitful is self-pretension; when we claim to be what we are not, 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 that use nice sounds and wonderful sentiments to cover ugly thoughts and intentions. We need to be careful not only about what we say to others, but about how we interpret what others say to us. Perhaps this week's message could be summed up this way: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (*Matt. 10:16*).

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 7.

## The Mystery of God

Life is full of mysteries. Physicist David Deutsch wrote that “everyday events are stupendously complex when expressed in terms of fundamental physics. If you fill a kettle with water and switch it on, all the supercomputers on Earth working for the age of the universe could not solve the equations that predict what all those water molecules will do—even if we could somehow determine their initial state and that of all the outside influences on them, which is itself an intractable task.”—David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Transform the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011), Kindle edition, locations 1972–1975.

If we are confounded about something as mundane as water molecules, how could we even begin to expect to understand the mysteries of God?

**Read** Proverbs 25:2, 3. What point is the author making, and how can we apply it to a broader situation?

---



---



---

What makes the glory of God different from the glory of kings is His “mysterious” nature, and by implication our human incapacity to fully understand Him. The Hebrew root *str* (“conceal,” “hide”), from which comes our word *mystery*, is often used in the Hebrew Scriptures to characterize what makes God the only true God (*Isa. 45:14, 15*). There are things about God that we simply cannot understand. On the other hand, what makes the glory of kings is their willingness to be scrutinized. Transparency and accountability should be the first quality of leadership (*Deut. 17:14–20*). It is the king’s duty to “search out a matter”; that is, to give an explanation for events and for what he is doing.

**Life is so full of unanswered questions, isn’t it? In a split second, seemingly random events can mean the difference between life and death. Some people go from one tragedy to another, while 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

Though not a recent fabrication (especially in the Western world), the idea has taken hold in recent years that argues for the relative nature of truth. That is, what is true for one person, or one culture, might not be true for another. While on one level this is always correct (some places drive on the right side of the road, others on the left), on another it's a dangerous error, especially in the moral realm. Certain things are right and others are wrong, regardless of where we live or our personal preferences. In the end, we must always submit our views to the Word of God and the truths found there. God's Word must be our ultimate source for knowing right and wrong, good and evil.

**Read Proverbs 26:11, 12.** (See also *Judg. 21:25; 1 Cor. 1:20, 21; 2:6, 7; 2 Cor. 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. Yet it was as wrong then as it is now. As we have already seen, none of us understands everything; in fact, we don't 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 don't have all the answers.

In the case of fools, as seen in this proverb, the reason to be concerned is that the influence of their folly will go beyond themselves. They are now more convinced than ever of their wisdom; they will therefore repeat their folly. They may even be so convincing that others will think they are wise, will honor them, and consult them for advice, which can lead to big problems (*Prov. 26:8*). Folly will spread, but labeled as "wisdom," it can be that much more damaging. Furthermore, fools are so foolish that they are not aware of their folly.

**How often are you tempted to compromise on what you know are core values, core truths? What happens, however, when certain core values collide? How can we know which ones trump the others?**

---



---



---

## The Sluggard

**“The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth”** (*Prov. 26:15, NIV*).

Just as with students who spend more time and energy preparing to cheat on an exam than studying for it, it is ironic that lazy people 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!” (*Prov. 26:13, NKJV*). Therefore, it is wiser to stay at home and not to confront 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. We will not be able to move forward if we are afraid of obstacles. People who do not dare to commit themselves will never taste the fullness of life.

Look at some of the other imagery in those verses. Just as the door swings on its hinges but doesn’t go anywhere, lazy people turn in their beds; that is, they just change position, but don’t go anywhere, either.

The other image, in verse 15, is even more startling. They can get their hands into a dish of food *but are too lazy to bring them back to feed themselves*.

But even worse is their intellectual laziness, their closed-mindedness and certainty about their own positions. Therefore, they will always be right, wiser than seven wise men (*vs. 16*), and will not be open to other views, perhaps wiser than their own. Those who think they have all the answers usually don’t.

**“In the judgment men will not be condemned because they conscientiously believed a lie, but because they did not believe the truth, because they neglected the opportunity of learning what is truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 55. How do we understand our role in giving others the “opportunity” to learn what is truth? Where does our responsibility begin, and where does it end?**

---



---

## The Friend as Enemy

If we are more disappointed by our friends than by our enemies, it is because we expect good from our friends and evil from our enemies. It doesn't always work out that way, though, does it? That's 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 be a sign of love?

---

---

---

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

Open rebuke is also a sign that our love is not built on illusion and pretension, but is based on truth and on trust.

**Read** Proverbs 27:17. What can be the effect of confrontation between friends?

---

---

---

The image of iron sharpening iron suggests a reciprocal benefit. Friendship tested by true confrontation will improve not only the quality of the friendship but also stimulate and strengthen both personalities. The respective weapons will gain in efficiency. We will end up more equipped for our future struggles. People who take refuge in themselves and their own ideas only, and never confront the challenge of different views, will not grow in knowledge or in character.

**Have you ever been rebuked for something that could have really hurt you? Suppose you hadn't been warned about it? Keeping this in mind, if you need to do the same for someone else, how can you do it in a redemptive manner, rather than in a judgmental and critical way?**

## The Enemy as Friend

**Read** Proverbs 26:17–23. On the lines below, summarize what is being said.

---



---



---

Proverbs, again, gets into the power of words, this time dealing with the harm caused by slander and quarreling. Those who slander your enemy before your face, to make you think they're on your side, are really like "charcoal": they feed the quarrel and lead you into the fire of more troubles (*vs. 21, NKJV*).

Likewise "fervent lips," which sound so eloquent, can hide a "wicked heart" (*vs. 23, NKJV*). The politician who wants to be elected, the salesman who wants to sell his wares, the playboy who wants to seduce a woman—all of them know about the power of eloquence.

This passage's lesson is that we should be careful not to believe in every nice speech we hear. They can be dangerous precisely because they are nice. Some people are very good speakers; they can sound so persuasive, so sincere, and so caring, when inside, something completely different is going on. Though we have all been victims of people like this, who hasn't at some point been guilty of doing the same thing: saying one thing to a person but thinking or feeling something completely different? Proverbs, here, speaks strongly against this deceptiveness.

"Everything that Christians do should be as transparent as the sunlight. Truth is of God; deception, in every one of its myriad forms, is of Satan. . . . It is not a light or an easy thing to speak the exact truth. We cannot speak the truth unless we know the truth, and how often preconceived opinions, mental bias, imperfect knowledge, errors of judgment, prevent a right understanding of matters with which we have to do! We cannot speak the truth unless our minds are continually guided by Him who is truth."—Ellen G. White, *Reflecting Christ*, p. 71.

**How open and transparent are you in what you say? How much of a disconnect, if any, is there between your words and your thoughts? Do you really think that such duplicity can be maintained indefinitely? (See Matt. 10:26, 27.)**

---



---



---

**Further Study:** “The agency of the Spirit of God does not remove from us the necessity of exercising our faculties and talents, but teaches us how to use every power to the glory of God. The human faculties, when under the special direction of the grace of God, are capable of being used to the best purpose on earth. Ignorance does not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently. The great object of education is to enable us to use the power which God has given us in such a manner as to represent the religion of the Bible and promote the glory of God.

“We are indebted to Him who gave us existence, for the talents that have been entrusted to us, and it is a duty we owe our Creator to cultivate and improve these talents.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, pp. 361, 362.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1** Discuss more about the mysteries that we find in everyday life, whether in nature, in human interactions, or in questions about faith and the nature of God and salvation. It’s one of the great ironies of life 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, indeed, relative, cultural, and changing? How do we distinguish them from truths that are eternal, universal, and immutable? Why is it so important that we know the difference between them? Why is the confusion of contingent truths with eternal truths one of the great dangers we face?
- 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 relate to such a sentiment? In what way can Matthew 10:16 help?

## Opening “a Lot More Doors”

In Bridgeport, West Virginia, the only Seventh-day Adventist church in Harrison County meets each Sabbath in the local Presbyterian church. Although they don't have their own building yet, members of the Central Hills Seventh-day Adventist Church are certainly building relationships.

In response to the Discover Bible School mailings, the Central Hills church has received more than 300 requests for Bible studies just from within Harrison County. Pastor James Volpe and his 30 church members are doing their best to keep up. Some of the most active members include Angela, 21, Heather, 20, and Lee, 22.

“We were driving from house to house,” remembers Heather, “handing out the first two lessons, and asking people if they wanted to have personal visits or continue the lessons through the mail. One of the ladies we met requested that we return so Angela and I decided that we would do it. We studied with her every week.

“That winter, her son committed suicide. We quit doing Bible studies, but we'd still visit her. We helped her around Thanksgiving and Christmas. Sometimes she comes to church.” Heather and Angela have since resumed the Bible studies with this student.

While Lee doesn't give personal Bible studies, he jumped in and organized the mailings. “I make sure the completed lessons get graded and sent back so that person can start on the next lesson. If a month goes by and we haven't heard from the Bible student, then we follow up and make sure that we keep in contact with them.”

While the members of the Central Hills church have been supportive, the church's young people have especially enjoyed being involved.

“Our youth group has gotten a lot stronger,” says Angela. “I've always liked to be involved in some way; I just didn't know how.”

“I think this is one of the first times we could put into practice all of the stuff we hear every week, we could actually be a part of something and watch the church grow,” adds Lee.

Heather believes that giving personal Bible studies is one of the best methods for church growth and spiritual commitment. “All of the youth were together, delivering the lessons. Then once Angela and I started giving Bible studies, I enjoyed it. It made me grow spiritually.

“We had an [evangelistic] seminar coming to the area, but by us doing the Bible studies and getting out—that helped our church to grow. It opens a lot more doors.”