Beyond the Masquerade
Guest: Dr. Juli Slattery
Host: Noel Meador
Noel: Welcome to Oxygen365. I'm your host Noel Meador, and this is Episode#26. Today's guest is Dr. Juli Slattery. Dr. Slattery is a widely known clinical psychologist, author, speaker and broadcast media professional. She is the president and co-founder of Authentic Intimacy, which is a ministry passionate about reclaiming God's design for intimacy and sexuality. Her books include Passion Pursuit, Finding the Hero in Your Husband, No More Headaches, Guilt-Free Motherhood and today's focus, Beyond the Masquerade. She and her husband, Mike, have been married since 1994 and have three children. Dr. Slattery, welcome to the show.

Dr. Slattery: Thanks for having me.

Noel: This topic that we're going to be covering in your book, Behind the Masquerade, I think it's a subject that many people wrestle with. And, I don't know, I think the buzzword in our society is there is a lot of weight put on authenticity and being authentic. You hear a lot of that showing up in the millennials and different generations. But when you describe authenticity, what is that? What does that look like and really specifically taking off the mask?

Dr. Slattery: Well, I think, to be honest, if we were fully authentic, people wouldn't like us very much because the authentic truth is that we're insecure, we're selfish people, we love people conditionally. And if you just came out with that and just said, "Hey, this is who I am, deal with it. I'm authentically just going to choose to kind of be a jerk most of the time," then you wouldn't have a lot of friends.

And so the reality of our life is that we realize that there's things inside of us that really aren't good to show to people, fears we have, insecurities, wounds we carry around, selfishness. And so we learned, at a very young age, our parents teach us that some parts of you are okay to show to other people and other parts of you are not so good. You need to tuck those away. The best example I can use of that is even physically. I'm a mom of three boys and the three boys are all teenagers and I have been through those stages with them where they think they are authentically okay with never brushing their teeth or using deodorant or changing their clothes, and we have to say, "Hey, there are some things about your natural body that you need to clean up." And really the same is true with who we are internally.

And so authenticity starts with just being real with the fact that if we were just to be very honest about who we are, there's some ugliness there that we have to deal with.

Noel: And why is it so challenging for people to be authentic?
Dr. Slattery: Well, I think the fact that there is ugliness. If I authentically acted out with, for example, my husband how I always felt in the moments that I have to be true to myself, I really wouldn't be a very good wife. Same with friendships. Or as an employee, you just wouldn't be very good if you always were authentic to how you feel.

And I think the catch is realizing that in our culture we define who we are based on how we feel or what we're experiencing in the moment rather than basing who we are largely on what I choose. Even though I might not feel in love with my husband today, I choose to love him. And so being truly authentic has to start not with just expressing how we feel but expressing what we choose and why we make the choices we do.

Noel: So if the ugliness of our life is keeping us from being authentic, would you say the alternative is that a lot of us are posing and/or walking around with a mask?

Dr. Slattery: Yes, yes.

Noel: And what's the challenge or issue with us posing and wearing the mask? To some degree, like you used your kids as an example, "You need to go clean up. We don't want you to be your authentic self." But that doesn't necessarily translate very well in terms of a relationship or marriage in terms of us wearing the mask or posing.

Dr. Slattery: Yeah, I think that analogy really fits. If we carry that out, there's a difference between telling my 13-year-old son, "You stink, go douse yourself in a gallon of cologne so nobody can smell you. Mask that smell," versus, "You need to go take a shower. You need to get cleaned up." And if we apply that psychologically and emotionally, the posing that you mention, the masks that we wear are really a facade to throw people off the reality that there's something within us that's really offensive.

So we work really hard to succeed, to look good in other people's eyes. Maybe we please. We don't want anybody to be mad at us. Or we have friends around us all the time to project that we are somebody that we're not. And the difference between that and what I'm suggesting is that just like physically we go take a shower every day, we brush our teeth. Do you do that emotionally?

And as a faith-based Christian psychologist, I believe that that happens when I go before the Lord every day and I say, "God, would you search my heart? Would you show me where I'm offensive, where I'm selfish, where the conflict
in my marriage is really all about me but I'm projecting it on my husband?"
And what the Bible says is that when we do that that God actually is faithful to
clidean us. It uses that word, to cleanse us from our unrighteousness and to help
us behave in a different way, give us a new heart.

And so that authenticity comes with being honest with ourselves first and
saying, "I need help, I need to deal with my stuff," and not pretending that I'm
someone I'm not but really asking God to give me a different heart.

Noel: So I wanted to break this down for some of our listeners. This might be
new terminology for them when we talk about the heart and cleansing. Would
you say that the heart is in psychological terms the limbic system? Would you
use those parallels in terms of the subconscious?

Dr. Slattery: No, not necessarily.

Noel: Okay.

Dr. Slattery: The limbic system is more involved in our deep-seated emotions.

Noel: Right.

Dr. Slattery: I think the heart has a lot more to do with our will when I use that
word.

Noel: Okay.

Dr. Slattery: What kind of person am I? Am I the type of person that's always
going to be out for me? Am I going to be the kind of person who when push
comes to shove, I don't know how to love someone unconditionally and to show
them grace?

Noel: Right.

Dr. Slattery: Or am I making the choice that I see my selfishness, I see where I
ruin relationships? I don't want to do that anymore. So I think it's a lot more
about our intentions and our will than it is about how we feel.

Noel: Okay, just a recent occurrence, a lady that I know, she's been living with
this image where she can't go into a party or into a social setting without just
perseverating over how does she look, is she projecting the right image. And it
literally paralyzes her. And here she is. She's a professional. She's been very
successful in life, but it's almost that paralysis by analysis at this point in her
life where she's so concerned about what everybody else thinks about in her life and she's got to put forth that perfect image. And it's killing her. It's killing her, not physically but emotionally, and she's just a wreck, and it's affecting her relationship with her husband.

What would you say to that lady? What's driving this? And how does she begin to heal? Truly at the end of the day, I think she's very unhappy with what she's potentially set up as her deck of cards that she is presenting to the world.

Dr. Slattery: A lot of people can relate to that, men and women. For some, it's work. It's like, "If my boss figures out that I'm not all that, then my life is crumbling." So I think we all can get plugged into that system of performance but at the bottom line there is a fear that's driving it. And if I were talking to this woman, I would want to ask some questions about what would happen in a social situation if you were exposed. What are you afraid of happening? And most likely there is probably a memory or two in her past or something like that happened and she was humiliated, or she was told as a little kid this is how you get people to like you and if you ever embarrass the family or something, then that's the worst thing in the world that could happen or we won't love you anymore.

We carry around messages like that. Again usually they're instilled either in childhood or in the impressionable adolescence period that cement those fears in me and in you. For me, it was performance. It was like in order for me to get love from the people I love, I have to perform. And I really believed that as a kid and as a young adult, I had to get all As, I played competitive tennis. Losing was like the world crashed like I'm nothing if I lose. And so it was win at any cost, push your body, and I had to get to the bottom of the fact that I was really afraid of losing love if I didn't perform not only from people, but ultimately I was afraid of losing love from God if I didn't even perform for him. And until I really addressed that lie that I'd been believing, I was going to keep creating different ways to perform.

Noel: So as the cure to all this, I think you touched on it but is it intimacy and understanding how to step back into that intimacy whether it's with relationships around us or with what some of us have said is our relationship with God?

Dr. Slattery: Yeah, I would say it even goes a step even further back than intimacy, because before you can offer yourself to someone else, you have to know who you are. And so it really starts with identity. And so many of us have built identities on what people think of us or how we're performing. And until your identity can be completely separated from that judgment of other people or
that performance, it has to be rooted in something that's solid. And I really believe that we were created for a purpose and that my identity and my worth ultimately comes from knowing that I was created for something. What am I created for? I'm created for a relationship with God. I can find out about that by seeking God. I'm created for intimacy in relationships with other people. How do I begin building that? So it goes back to asking those very basic questions that we ask on big birthdays like, "Why am I even here? Does my life mean anything?" If you can't answer those and have a solid and unchanging answer, then your worth and your security is going to be pretty fickle even as an adult.

Noel: How does it show up in a marriage? I just think about so often in relationships, we fall in love because we're attracted and there is the emotional connection and we're meeting each other's needs. But then you start to look at where many marriages start to go awry or they start to fail is that the intimacy is no longer there. And sometimes it's because we're not really authentic with who we are. We're posing even in that. What would it look like for a marriage that is actually authentic and open as you described?

Dr. Slattery: Well, I think we've got to be really careful when we say what does an authentic marriage look like because some people take that to be, "Well, I'm going to go tell my spouse exactly what I think of him at every moment of the day," and you're not going to have a very good marriage if you do that. I think where it starts is what we've argued and said that if I'm looking to get my security through my husband and how he treats me, that's not fair to him and it's going to set us up for failure.

I'm married to a wonderful man and he is very encouraging. He is a great husband but he is not able to keep me afloat emotionally. That's the work of my relationship with God and something much deeper than our marriage. So when we go through times where let's say he's depressed or he's got a work issue and he can't invest in me the way I want him to invest in me, do I get insecure and angry and manipulative or can I just say, "Hey, I can emotionally survive without you being attentive for a couple months and we're going to be okay"?

So I think intimacy a lot of times breaks down because we're expecting too much of each other. We put the demands of keeping me emotionally afloat on my spouse and no marriage can sustain that over time.

Noel: Right, what about the situation... I know this is maybe a isolated incident, but for the wife I'm thinking of listening to this and it's been months and she's been trying to press into, "Okay, I'm going to rely on God and not put the pressure and demand of what I need on my husband," what do you say to them? She feels very hopeless like, "Is this ever going to change?" What would be
Dr. Slattery: Well, I think there are really two levels of this in marriage. One level is, "What do I need to survive? Emotionally what do I need to survive?" And the basics of what we need to survive really just like what we need physically to survive are pretty minimal. You need a relatively safe environment. You need to have this sense of purpose and worth in your life that might not even come from your marriage. But then you take it a step further and you say, "What do I need to have a thriving marriage? What do I need to be enjoying life with my husband?" And those aren't necessarily things you need to survive or things you need for a good relationship. To have a good relationship, you need kindness and understanding and sharing with one another and having fun and experiencing friendship. You need physical intimacy.

So whatever's lacking on that second area of, "What's missing here?" and that, "We don't have a thriving marriage. We're not building," you've got to identify what those things are and then start even asking your husband. He probably has things in the marriage, too, that he feels aren't being met. So how do we make things better? It's your fault. You're not meeting my needs. But we're kind of at a wall, or even in the last few years, we've gone backwards. How do we start building towards really making this a fun and intimate marriage again?

Noel: Yeah, I want to circle back, I think, when you talked about identity. I want to put a little bit more meaning to that. And in the context of our society, a lot of people talk about self-concept, our self-image. Because if you look at the Scriptures oftentimes from the church and we hear you don't have... Be prideful and all these things. And the lines become very blurred in terms of self-image and a healthy self-image versus being prideful. And really what you're talking about in terms identity, can you help our listeners differentiate between the two? And what's a healthy self-image that you're talking about in terms of showing up in the relationship?

Dr. Slattery: Yeah, I think that's a great question. There is a difference between a positive self-image and a healthy self-image. Because I think what psychology has done and I would say even a lot of Christian psychology told you that you should have a positive self-image. And really what a healthy self-image is is reality. It's being true. So there are things about me that are positive and there are things about me that are negative. And God would want me to walk in truth. His desire is for me to have truth about myself, and it says in the Bible that actually when you have truth, it actually sets you free because you don't have to pretend anymore.

So healthy self-concept means that I'm going to acknowledge the things about
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me that are good, the gifts God has given me, my strengths, the things I've done well, but I'm also going to be equally as honest about the areas that I struggle and the ways I've let people down. I'm not going to camp there and beat myself up for that. I bring that before the Lord. But when I can say to a friend or I can say to my husband, "I'm sorry, you're right. I didn't handle that well. Will you forgive me?" and not be defensive, because I've accepted that I have limitations, that really opens the door for a much deeper love and intimacy than when we're just always fighting about, "Well the only reason I did that was because you made me," or, "I was in a corner." Own your stuff. It's not going to kill you. It doesn't mean you're a terrible person to admit that you have weaknesses and you have failures and you've made mistakes that you deeply regret.

And I think in most marriages when you are willing to respond not only with embracing the positive but also the negative, there is a lot of grace there and a lot more freedom.

Noel: So maybe help us understand how do we begin to take off this mask? That sounds like it's one of the big components to actually living an authentic life. What would that look like?

Dr. Slattery: Well, I think some of it is acknowledging that you're wearing the mask.

Noel: Okay.

Dr. Slattery: And all of us do to some extent. But to really in your heart of hearts be able to say to yourself first and to even God, "I'm hiding. I feel like 60% of my day I'm really just hiding and I'm afraid of being found out," or, "I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. I want to set it as a goal to not do that anymore. A year from now I want to look back and feel like I am much more real with people than I was a year ago. I'm much more comfortable admitting where I struggle. I'm much more comfortable listening to other people's stories rather than having to tell them mine all the time." So those would be some important first steps.

And I just really encourage wherever you are in your faith walk to ask God to help you to do that, because that's his desire for you. If you think about the people that have impacted you in your life the most profoundly, they're probably people who are very real and are honest and aren't pretending. And that's the kind of people we want to be. We want to impact the people we love and we want to impact our communities, but we've got to get those masks off first.
Noel: Yeah, I think that the challenge with that and I think we've all been in those situations where someone takes us too far too fast and it's almost like they're walking transparency and it's almost like, "Whoa, too much information." Are you advocating for that? What's the stages and what's the steps on those?

Dr. Slattery: Yeah, yeah, that's a really good question too. I love the concept of measured truth. In other words, there are an awful lot of people in my life who don't know a lot about me because it's not appropriate, but everything they do know about me hopefully is true. So I'm setting boundaries in terms of what I'm going to reveal to people, but let every experience they have with me be true to who I am. I'm not hiding anything but I'm also not telling everything.

And then there are a few people in our lives that we do trust and we have committed to being vulnerable to, who we do take the risk and say, "I'm going through some tough stuff," or, "I'm finally admitting something that I've kept a secret for a long time and I want to share this with you and ask that you respect it and walk with me through it." You've got to have one or two people like that in your life. And for some people, the quickest way to find that is actually to go to counseling to learn to do that, because counseling is a safe relationship. And you can learn to be authentic with someone who is just trained to listen and affirm, and then you can learn how to take those steps in more intimate relationships like a marriage relationship.

Noel: So I'm going to bring this back to marriage but what would you counsel someone who maybe is living a lie and their spouse doesn't know the full truth? What would be the steps there? Do they just come out and pull off the mask and say, "I'm going to lay it all out there and let the chips fall where they may," or is there more of a measured truth to this, again sequencing it? What's your advice to them?

Dr. Slattery: Yeah, I think a measured truth is really important. First, I'm going to say the first person you need to be honest with is God. He knows that you're hiding. He knows the secret you're keeping. You're not going to fool him. But he is really the one who is able to give you the strength to embrace the truth and to share it in a way that's loving. And then when it comes to sharing it with your spouse, remember that this isn't always and it is not all about you. It's not about, "Well, finally I'm going to be true to myself and take it or leave it."

You're married because you promised to love someone and you promised to live life with them. And so when we share hard truths with the people we love, we're always wanting to think about how do I do this in a loving way. I know this truth is going to hurt. Let's say you're addicted to porn or you're sleeping...
around or you've been stealing money. That kind of truth is going to be devastating for your spouse to hear. They need to hear it because you won't have intimacy unless you share it. But to just be loving about it and even asking a counselor how do I communicate this in a way not to protect myself, not to be defensive, but to really care for my spouse's heart. What's the right mode? Do I write a letter? Do I talk to them? And certainly having the attitude that you've got to give space for someone to accept and adapt to the new truth, to digest that, to process through it, to ask questions. That's a journey and it's a process.

Noel: Yeah, yeah. So I guess my final question is this. What are the benefits? Because this is a scary proposition for a lot of people. I think our society, you talked about performance, we're so conditioned at a very young age to embrace somewhat of the, "I've got to mask the truth and step into the performance and over deliver." It's all based around from a societal standpoint. But what are the true benefits when we start to take off the mask? Can you describe that for listeners?

Dr. Slattery: Yeah, I would love to. When I first started to realize how much I was wearing the mask as a young adult, I think first I realized how much my life was dominated by that. The first thought when you wake up is maybe something you feel like you failed at or fear or being competitive. Every relationship is measured by how do I stack up to this person or what are they thinking about me. And if you...with that script that I have to protect my identity, I have to make sure no one knows what's really going on, you realize you're wasting the most precious gift you have.

We're here on this Earth to impact people, and to connect with people and to make a difference in people's lives. The masks make all that impossible even if you're doing good work. Let's say you work at a volunteer place or ministry and you're doing work, but it's not from your heart, it's just a performance, there's an emptiness there. There's an emptiness there even in your most intimate relationships.

And when you get to the point where you can really just be you and you're so comfortable and secure in who you are or that you can invest in the person sitting across the room from you and not worry about what they think about you, that's when you really are able to engage fully in relationships, in mission and making a difference in people's lives.

Noel: Well, Dr. Slattery, I just want to say thank you for sharing these truths. And her book is where you can learn more about this, Beyond the Masquerade, and it's just a great exploration into this wonderful truth. And I think a lot of us, we avoid it at all costs, but once you start living into it, it's a game-changer.
Freedom is really I think what you're describing for so many people that are locked up and feeling that, "I'm living out of fear rather than freedom."

So I just want to say thank you. And you can find more about her book. If you want to purchase it, we're going to have links right below to your website where I know you have a lot of resources for people that want to step into this journey.

Dr. Slattery: Yeah. Well, thank you, Noel. It's been great.

Noel: Thank you. All right, take care.