Hypocrisy

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Introduction

Hypocrisy is an unpleasant word signaling an empty existence and shallow life. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be what he is not, or one who pretends to be better than he really is, or wishes to be seen as virtuous without really being so.

English Definitions

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary says a hypocrite is “a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion.”

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines hypocrisy as “the practice of claiming to have higher standards or more laudable beliefs than is the case.”

Greek Definitions

The New Testament employs a family of Greek words that communicate the concept of hypocrisy. The verb hupokrinomai, which originally meant “to answer” and later “to play a part on the stage,” in Scripture means “to pretend, make believe, or dissemble.” The noun hupokrisis refers to “hypocrisy, pretense, playacting, putting on an outward show.” The noun hupokritēs refers metaphorically to one who is an actor, i.e., a pretender, dissembler, or hypocrite. In contrast, the adjective anupokritos pertains to that which is without pretense or hypocrisy, i.e., genuine and sincere. Finally, the verb sunupokrinomai means to join with others in pretense or hypocrisy.

In Classical Greek, a hypocrite was a stage actor, i.e., one who wore a mask, and in speech and action depicted a character in the play. There was no inherent connotation of evil or deception involved in the early use of the term. However, with the passing of time, the word took on a bad meaning. It came to denote one who pretended to be what he was not, especially in the areas of religion and morality. The New Testament always uses the word in an evil sense.¹

Jesus repeatedly condemned the scribes and the Pharisees for this failure. He said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1). The twenty-third chapter of Matthew contains a scathing rebuke of their fraudulent faith. Seven times Jesus said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” (Matt. 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

A hypocrite is a fellow who isn’t himself on Sundays! The hypocrite sings Have Thine Own Way, Lord but does as he pleases. The hypocrite sings Onward Christian Soldiers but is usually AWOL from the Lord’s army. The hypocrite sings I Love To Tell the Story but never mentions Christ to his friends. The hypocrite sings Throw Out the Lifeline but would rather cast a fishing
The hypocrite sings *We’re Marching to Zion* but goose-steps straight to the liquor store. The hypocrite sings *Blest Be the Tie That Binds* but allows fellowship to be severed by the slightest offense. The hypocrite sings *All To Jesus I Surrender* even though he yields to temptation and is in fact a servant of sin.

Jesus Christ is displeased with those who “say, and do not,” those who “sing, and do not” as well as those who “pray, and do not” (Matt. 23:1-3). For the hypocrite, religion is an outward show; he merely pays lip-service to Christianity. This is a perilous trap (Luke 6:46-49).

Our outward appearance and our inner character must match. In this regard, I am reminded of the poem entitled, **The Praying Hypocrite:**

I knelt to pray when day was done,  
And prayed, “Lord, bless everyone;  
Lift from each heart the pain,  
And let the sick be well again.”  
And then I woke again one day,  
And carelessly went on my way;  
The whole day long I did not try  
To wipe a tear from any eye.  
I did not try to share the load  
Of any brother on the road;  
I did not even go to see  
the sick man just next door to me.  
Yet once again when every day was done,  
I prayed, “Lord, bless everyone.”  
But as I prayed to my ear  
Came a voice that whispered dear,  
“Pause, hypocrite, before you pray;  
Whom have you tried to bless today?  
God’s sweetest blessings always go,  
By hands that serve Him here below.”  
And then I hid my face and cried,  
“Forgive me Lord, for I have lied;  
Let me but live another day,  
And I will live the way I pray.”

Those who would grow to be mature Christians must lay aside “guile” and “hypocrisy” (1 Pet. 2:1-3), practicing an unfeigned love for both God and man (Rom. 12:9; 1 Pet. 1:22-23).

We must avoid hypocrisy both in worship (Matt. 6:1-6; 15:7-9) and in our dealings with others (Matt. 7:1-5; Luke 6:41–42). This was the great downfall of the Jewish people, who considered themselves better than the Gentiles, but committed the same sins (Rom. 2:1-3, 17-24).

Some attempt to hide behind a mask of feigned righteousness. They try to deceive others and also attempt to fool themselves. Yet, such effort is futile because we cannot hide anything from the Omnipotent, Omnispresent and Omniscent One who will judge us in that Final Day, when
our character and manner of life will be exposed for all to see (Eccles. 12:14; Luke 8:17; Heb. 4:12-13).

Hypocrisy harms relationships with our fellow men. As the noted sociologist Charles Horton Cooley once said, “If we divine a discrepancy between a man’s words and his character, the whole impression of him becomes broken and painful; he revolts the imagination by his lack of unity, and even the good in him is hardly accepted.”ii Yet, hypocrisy has an even greater damaging effect on our relationship with God. When the Final Judgment is pictured in Matthew 24 and 25, those who stand condemned will be assigned a place with the hypocrites, in that doleful realm where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 24:45-51, esp. vs. 51).

If hypocrisy keeps us from heaven, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Consider the following words that are said to come from an old inscription inside the Lutheran cathedral in Lubeck, Germany: “Ye call Me Master and obey me not, Ye call Me Light and see Me not, Ye call Me Way and walk not, Ye call Me Life and desire Me not, Ye call Me wise and follow Me not, Ye call Me fair and love Me not, Ye call Me rich and ask Me not, Ye call Me eternal and seek Me not, Ye call Me gracious and trust Me not, Ye call Me mighty and honor Me not, Ye call Me just and fear Me not, If I condemn you, blame me not.”

Repulsed by hypocrisy in the church, some exclaim, “If that’s what Christianity is all about, I don’t want any part of it.” Without question, a hypocrite obstructs the cause of Christ, doing the devil’s work in the house of God. No excuse can be made for those whose lights have gone out. No defense can be made for salt that has lost its savor. No justification can be given for inconsistency between faith and practice.

Christians must live so as to attract rather than repel. However, anyone who would use the hypocrisy of others to excuse his own unfaithfulness is “copping out.” We don’t throw away good money because some bills are counterfeit. By the same token, we should not reject Christianity because there are some phony disciples. Do not allow the hypocrisy of others to come between you and God.

The fellow who is always complaining about hypocrites in the church has the outlook of a circling buzzard that overlooks all the live sheep, seeing only the dead ones. Are there hypocrites in the church? Yes. But you must not let that sad reality keep you from serving God. Pretenders also exist at school, at work, on the team, and in volunteer organizations. Yet, you don’t let that fact keep you from getting an education, earning a living, and being an active part of the community. The famous preacher, Billy Sunday, once said, “Hypocrites in the Church? Yes, and in the lodge, and at home. Don’t hunt through the Church for a hypocrite. Go home and look in the glass. Hypocrites? Yes. See that you make the number one less.”iii

**Conclusion**

Let us strive for sincerity. The Greek word *eilikrinēs*, translated “sincere,” occurring twice, has an interesting derivation and meaning. Thomas defines it as “judged by sunlight, unalloyed, pure.” BDAG say this word, which generally means “unmixed, without alloy,” when used in a moral sense “pertains to being sincere, without hidden motives or pretense, pure.” Approving the
things that are excellent, may we be **sincere** and blameless until the day of Christ (Phil. 1:9-11, esp. vs. 10). Remembering the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of our Lord and Savior, as spoken by the apostles, may our **sincere** minds be stirred up to faithful obedience (2 Pet. 3:1-2, esp. vs. 1).

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