



First-century bas-relief showing woman and poet, possibly the famous 4th-century Menander, holding a mask. Actors wore masks to depict their characters in the ancient theater.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEN TOUCHTON/VATICAN MUSEUM, ROME

# Hypocrite

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Jesus used the word "hypocrite" more than anyone else in the Bible. It appears first in the New Testament in Matthew 6:2.

"Hypocrite" appears thirty-one times in the King James Version, eleven of which are in the Old Testament in Job, Proverbs, and Isaiah. The rest are in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus used the word.

In the King James New Testament, "hypocrite" is not a translation but a transliteration; that is, the translators simply used the same word Matthew used but they spelled it with English letters instead of Greek letters. In our day, "hypocrite" means to pretend to be something one is not. This meaning may have grown out of the way it was used in the King James Version, translated in 1611.

The Greek word *hypocrites* (hoo-poh-cry-TAYS), translated "hypocrite," was a theatrical term referring to actors. It was a compound word of a preposition (*hupo*) which means "under" and a noun (*krites*) which refers to a person expressing a judgment or making a statement. The word appears in writings as early as the fourth century BC in reference to reciting or acting in a play.

The persons whom Jesus called hypocrites, however, were not playactors. As a matter of fact, the word is never used in the Bible to refer to an actor playing a part on a stage. Rather, the word may imply that the Pharisees Jesus condemned and those like them were guilty of sham, of pretending to be good when they knew they were not. The Pharisees in general were deeply convinced of their own righteousness. They were not like the mask-wearers in a Greek play. They were intensely scrupulous persons. Fred L. Fisher says that the word "hypocrite," therefore, as Jesus used it, should be translated "misguided."<sup>1</sup>

What did Jesus mean by his use of the term? His use of it related more to Old Testament writings than to the Greek theater. The Old Testament term *hanef* (khah-NEFF), translated in the King James Version as "hypo-

crit," refers to a person without piety,<sup>2</sup> who is "godless" (Job 8:13)<sup>3</sup> or "ungodly" (Isa. 9:17, NIV).

The Pharisees whom Jesus criticized were not insincere persons who pretended to be good. They did that which they had defined as good, and yet they knew that much of what they did was evil. By calling the Pharisees "hypocrites," Jesus referred to their self-righteousness and confidence in their own goodness. They had not intended to put on a false front. The problem was that their self-concept was wrong.

They were in this sense like actors who played to the crowd. They developed a morality for public applause. Therefore, they cultivated only a semblance of righteousness. They practiced the kind of honesty and uprightness that would evoke people's praise. They convinced themselves this was genuine righteousness and scorned any who spoke of the righteousness of faith or of the law of love. Their effort to impress people perverted their giving, praying, self-discipline, values, and even service to God.

"Hypocrisy" in the New Testament is more than a pretense. It is the action of people turning away from what God wants them to do to become instruments of evil. The Pharisees magnified the Law and meant thereby to serve God. Instead of serving God, they supplanted him with the very Law he had given them. They became godless and impious persons. This is the general meaning of "hypocrite" as Jesus used the term.

"Hypocrites" are blind persons attempting to lead other blind persons. ○

<sup>1</sup>Fred L. Fisher, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>Benjamin Davies, ed., *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Boston: Bradley and Woodruff), p. 221.

<sup>3</sup>HOLY BIBLE *New International Version*, copyright © 1978, New York Bible Society. Used by permission.

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Lesson reference: L&W: Matthew 6:2