

Hypocrisy - Is It Always Evil?

If you are in any way familiar with the details of the Lord's life on earth, recorded as these are in the Gospels, you will know of or remember the continual conflict and antagonism which existed between Him and the then religious leaders of the Jews, the Scribes and the Pharisees. Right from the outset, probably even as a boy, the Lord sensed the widespread insincerity and hypocrisy of these people and during His ministry He frequently spoke about it and challenged them because of it. He noted, you may remember, their pretended piety "to be seen of men" (Matthew 6:5). How they advertised their acts of charity and prayed in public; fasted and were forever out to catch the attention of others. On numerous occasions He could not but note, and must have been appalled by, the way in which they scrambled for the seats which carried the most prestige at feasts and in the synagogues. He warned His followers against hypocrisy (Luke 12: 1) and in words which enraged them spoke to the Scribes and Pharisees, denouncing them as hypocrites. "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites: for you are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (Matthew 23: 27,28).

Hypocrisy is something we know we should try to avoid even if we are not always successful in doing so. We try not to say things we don't mean. When we do we feel hypocritical. There is always the temptation to put on a show of being what we are not and we know we should resist this. Otherwise, and rightly so we feel we deserve to be called 'hypocrites'. At one time the word 'hypocrite' meant a 'playactor'. The Scribes and the Pharisees were play-actors. They acted at being pious and religious when in reality they were anything but pious and religious. And we on our part don't want to be 'play-actors'. Play-actors pretending feelings, or interests, or concerns, or convictions that inwardly we do not have.

"If", wrote Swedenborg, "the will and thought are not presented in the face as in an image, what is seen there is not the will and the thought, but hypocrisy or deceit; because the person presents a face different from what he wills and thinks". ([Arcana Caelestia 3934](#)). Wherever then we ourselves, or someone else, "presents a face different from what he wills and thinks" there you have hypocrisy. It's all a question of what we think within ourselves and the image we project before the eyes of others. The one should be in agreement with the other. Often they are not. When they are not there is hypocrisy.

Simple as it may sound, and straightforward, the subject is not, however, without its difficulties. And these are what I would like to look at, with you. Often, for example, there is an element of pretense in our relationship with other people, and times when we feel we have to say things which in fact we do not really feel. We might be invited to view a painting or see some object that another has made, and we resort to congratulations and encouragement such as within we do not feel. Is this being hypocritical? Are we being hypocrites? As we look back on such occasions we ask ourselves should we have been totally honest, said what we felt, even at the expense of the hurt and disappointment it would have caused. And it is because such questions are so real and because we are talking about everyday occurrences where they arise, that we need to probe more deeply and look more closely at what is meant.

Strictly speaking hypocrisy is involved - and only involved - when certain motives are present. And it is important for us to note this. The trouble with the Scribes and the Pharisees is that they put on a pretense of piety and holiness because they saw it was in their selfish interests to do so. They knew that they themselves would benefit from it. It would increase their standing in the eyes of their fellows. And this is the kind of hypocrisy the Lord warned us about and which we are to be on our guard against. "Hypocrites" wrote Swedenborg "are they who speak well, and who do well, but regard themselves in everything" (*Heaven and Hell 68*). Hypocrisy is to pretend or to dissemble from some evil or self-regarding motive. It is to put on the appearance of being interested in something or in someone in the hope, or with the intention, of personally benefitting in some way. It is, for example, to praise someone or something they have done for what we hope to get out of them. It is as despicable as that.

Motive, as always, governs the nature of the act. On the one hand, and as we have just seen, it can make the hypocrisy extremely serious and damning. On the other hand it can render the hypocrisy relatively harmless and unimportant. In fact, pretense though there may be, if it has a good motive within it, is not really hypocrisy at all. "The simulation and cunning, that have what is good as their end, whether it is of the neighbour, or that of our country, or of the Church, are prudence; and the evils that are mixed up with them can be mingled with good, from and for the sake of good. But the simulation and cunning that have evil as their end are not prudence, but are craft and deceit, with which good can by no means be conjoined". (*Arcana Caelestia 3993*).

And here again, "Flattery differs according to the end in view. If the end be friendship, or the pleasure of conversation, or any other of a like nature, and also lawful gain, there is not much evil in it. But if the end or objective be to entice to the discovery of secrets, and thereby to bind another to evil engagements, in general, if the end or motive be to do hurt, then there is evil in it." (*Arcana Caelestia* 5388).

We don't, then, have to feel we are hypocrites, or being hypocritical, if our motive is a good one, though of course it is up to us to make sure that it is. If our intention is to encourage, strengthen or uplift someone in some way, this is not being hypocritical, even though we may say things we do not really think or feel. Because hypocrisy was so strongly condemned by the Lord many people have thought it is incumbent on them in every situation and on all occasions to state exactly what they feel and how they see things, irrespective of the damage they may do or the hurt they may cause. As has been said: "Ours (especially) is an age which, in rebelling against hypocrisy, sometimes goes to the other extreme. Complete candor, the utmost frankness, are lauded as virtues even when brutal and uncalled for. To expose one's every thought and feeling becomes admirable, if not indeed a sacred duty; and any concealment, no matter from what motive, is branded as a vice." But - and this is the point - it shouldn't be.

Evil though it may appear to be to conceal one's thoughts and feelings about an object, a person or a situation (and it has already been said that in certain circumstances it is not evil) yet there can be present, in the determination to be frank and open, a much greater evil. Perverse as human nature is, that determination so to be frank and open may be motivated by a desire to - as we say - 'cut another down to size'; to see them suffer, or to belittle them. "I would be less than honest with you" we often hear it said, "if I didn't tell you such and such". But what is the motive for telling them such and such? Could it be that it is from a desire to hurt or to have the opportunity to gloat over another? These are questions we must ask ourselves. So much can be said in the name of total honesty and frankness which only results in harm being done and the destruction of some good somewhere.

As I said earlier, the hypocrisy which we must be on our guard against, and of which we are all capable, is the simulation or pretense of good affections for the sake of the advantage that we hope will come to ourselves. 'Though I think they are awful I will be nice to those people because of which I hope to benefit from them'.

That is hypocrisy. Putting on the appearance of being a Christian because of the reputation and standing it will bring us. This is where it is dangerous. This is what is to be avoided. And though by means of hypocrisy a person may deceive others in this world, he will not be able to do so in the next. "For", the Lord said, "there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs." (Luke 12: 3,4).

Because self-regard, the ego, 'I', is so important to us at the outset; because we want to get on and be thought well of; we are all tempted to be hypocrites. We try to seem to be what we are not for the advantage it will bring us. It is this preoccupation with self which is its starting point. Shun and overcome this and we need not worry about hypocrisy. There will be no reason to resort to it.

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