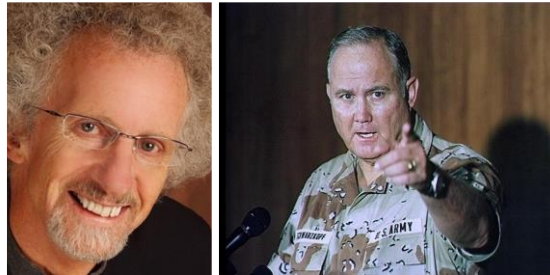


**November 5, 2023**  
**Matthew 23:1-12**  
**Faithful Roles**  
**Michael Stanfield**

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray: Gracious God, bless these ancient words that indeed they may impart your gift of good news to a people in need of new hope. We pray in Christ’s name, amen.*



Philip Yancey recalls preparing to teach a class on the Sermon on the Mount while watching General “Stormin” Norman Schwarzkopf give his final live televised briefing on the First Gulf War. As he listened, Yancey realized that he was hearing the words of Jesus in reverse.

“Blessed are the strong. Blessed are the triumphant in spirit. Blessed are the liberated. Blessed are the conquering soldiers.” The exact opposite of the Sermon on the Mount. Yancey was not critical of the general: he saw him as someone who “embodied perfectly the qualities of strength, leadership and confidence our world honors.”

However, “The Sermon on the Mount and indeed, the teachings of Jesus in general express quite plainly that God views this world with very different lenses.” Philip Yancey, “General Schwarzkopf Meets the Beatitudes,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 1991, 72.



Indeed. And Matthew is the gospel from which we receive the fullest set of the teachings of Jesus. Matthew loves to tell the stories of Jesus speaking to the multitudes. But unlike the other gospels, Matthew likes to contrast what Jesus tells the multitudes with what he tells his disciples. However, in today's text, Jesus does something quite unusual that's easy to miss: He addresses the multitude *and* his disciples both at the same time – publicly, in front of each other.

To the crowd, he acknowledges that the Scribes and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses. In other words, they hold a special place ordained by God. They may be full of themselves, but they are people with God-given authority. Unlike many movements toward change today, Jesus does not advocate tearing down the institution that God was behind starting in the first place. These leaders and this institution of Judaism are still important, says Jesus. You should therefore hear them out, he says.

But then Jesus turns his message towards his disciples and future leaders. Yes, hear them out – that is respect their office. But please, don't behave like them. Ouch.

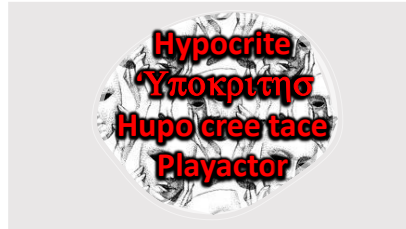
From there, Jesus levels the scribes and Pharisees with a whole host of criticisms.:

- He says they say one thing and then do another.
- He says they remain dressed in the robes of their office for show.
- He accuses them of putting too heavy a burden on people.
- He accuses them of liking the best seats, probably getting the best food and eating more of it than the people they serve could ever get.
- He accuses them of wanting their names sounded in the market, "Rabbi, rabbi."
- Basically, he says they have gone too far in being fat and happy, too far in demanding perfection from those who are just trying to survive.

In short, "Your religious leaders," says Jesus, "Have become . . . hypocrites. Hypocrites." In the section following the one I just read to you, he calls them that no less than six times. Can you imagine? I mean they are standing right there.

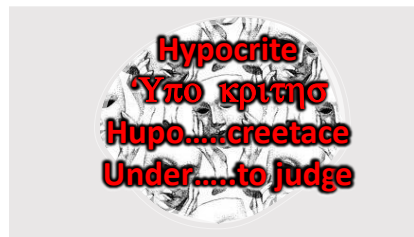


The word, “hypocrite” is a rather interesting one. Our English word is just a transliteration of the Greek word ὑποκριτής. It’s a word that comes from the Greek theater. In the days of Jesus, Greek actors played many different parts. A man (and it was always a man – who played even the parts of women) a man would run off the stage and get a mask, come back on and play a part, run off the stage and get another mask, and come back on and play another part.



He could play a half dozen or more parts in one Greek drama by the use of masks. These people were called ὑποκριται, or “play-actors,” (ὑποκριται being the plural of ὑποκριτής).

Now, *they* did this legitimately. That was their business – to play a role, to play a part. Nothing wrong with that. So, as we look at the word – “hypocrite” – we discover that its original meaning was a positive one.



It was made up of two Greek roots. ὑπο which means “under,” and κριτής which means “to judge” or “to evaluate.” So, “hypocrite”, originally meant literally, “one who must be judged ultimately, by that which is under the mask”.

One who is acting as a Christian, then, is one whose character ultimately is determined not by the ability to parrot back the party line, but by a real ability to ACT with a sense of authenticity out of a real relationship with Christ.



Great actors of stage and film are not just parroting – and they are not just playing a role; they are giving us something authentically *from* themselves because they are in a real relationship with that part *of* themselves.



They are in touch with that through the particular *role* they are playing.

So, playing a role, wearing a mask, is not necessarily the problem. We all do it. In fact, maintaining a healthy sense of community depends on it.



A mask is simply a role that provides a needed function to ensure that the community of which we are a part is whole. Every one of us is capable of wearing a multitude of masks depending on the role each of us is called on to play.



It can be a good idea to ask yourself what, if any, role *you* are being called upon to operate out of when relating to another. In basketball, if your team depends on you to be a rebounder it's generally not a good idea to be shooting a lot from the outside. You may be able to do both, but the team needs you more for your rebounding. Better then, not to get to far away from the basket.

But, of course, Jesus is talking in particular about roles that carry authority. And what he seems to be saying is that although roles are important, it is dangerous to completely identify all of who you are with any particular role. Hence his caution about being called Rabbi, teacher, or father – all roles of power and authority in his day – and so roles that were all too easy to identify with.

What Jesus is advocating for is a different kind of power – the power of authenticity. And the way to that, he says is via an attitude of humble service.

I will *act* a bit differently depending on whether I am wearing the mask of father or mother, loving son or daughter, faithful husband or wife, loyal friend, responsible employer, or faithful Christian.

It is easy to say with my mouth what a father needs to say to a rebellious child, but if I am acting more like a betrayed friend, I become a hypocrite or one whose actions are incongruent with the assigned role. If I talk about the love of Christ but am for the most part judgmental and condescending towards others, I am nothing *but* a hypocrite.

The problem is not the fact that we wear masks or take on roles. The problem is when there is not congruence between our roles and our behavior, our words and our actions – between the role and who we really are.



And what we all are ultimately, is human. That means we all have darkness within. When roles are used to avoid this salient fact, we judge everyone harshly but ourselves. We identify too completely with any one of the shiny masks we wear, or roles we play – then all we are *is* the mask – all we are *is* the role and we are not much in touch with what is really underneath – particularly when that role, that mask, is as a leader – and *especially* when that role is as a political or religious leader.

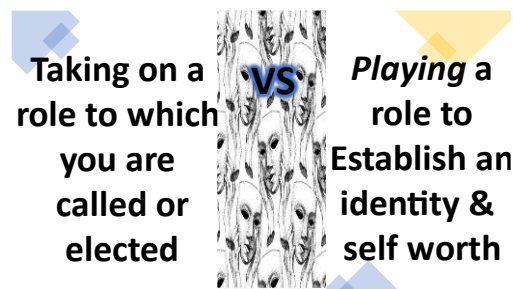


We recently elected Jane Crow, Bill Daly, Karen Neely, and Debbie Newkirk as elders into the office of ministry. That office, like that of the office I hold – that of Minister of Word and

Sacrament – carries authority. And it is an authority quite apart from us individuals who inhabit it. In that respect, it is like the mask of the Greek actor.

The office of elder is an office that promotes a biblical, wholesome, self-aware, God –aware, other-aware, prayerful, servant type of lifestyle that others will want to respect and follow. Thus, as a religious leader, the mask, the role, needs to reflect some genuine part of the one holding the office – a part that is truly capable of servant leadership in a church. That can only happen from a place of humility – one that truly desires the best for one’s people – spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically.

We all can take on many roles in this life that help us discover genuine parts of ourselves that we were not in touch with before.



But there is a big difference between *taking on* a role which one is *called* to with humility and integrity and *playing* a role in order to receive strokes to one’s ego. *Playing* – at religious leadership – no less than *political* leadership, in other words, hypocrisy, hurts everyone.

In fact, if you read the gospels straight through, not once will you find Jesus saying to a religious hypocrite, “Your sins be forgiven.” He says it to prostitutes, he says it to deplorable tax collectors, he says it to ne’er do wells. But he never says it to the religious leader who is a hypocrite – a bad actor. He can’t.

And the reason he can’t is that ‘playing’ at being a religious leader or really any kind of leadership role, is done in order to justify one’s own existence at the expense of others. In such cases, God is not really a part of the picture at all. It is a form of idolatry where the one holding the office really worships his or her own ego, and through the office, invites everyone else to do the same.

It’s been said that leaders generally want the front of the bus, the back of the church, and the center of attention. However, in the topsy, turvey world of God, those called to leadership in the church are charged to want the back of the bus, the front of the church and works that are more often, behind the scenes.

Yet Jesus would have us look first for the pretense in our own life, not just in the lives of our leaders – religious or otherwise. Of all faults, hypocrisy is the easiest to find in our leaders and the most difficult to see in ourselves. It is another reason why Jesus shuns the active seeking of leadership roles and titles among his disciples: We are *all* susceptible to the virus of hypocrisy –



pretending to be more than we are, professing more than we can live up to – in order to justify ourselves before others.



On a recent visit to E-tae-one, a large market in South Korea where one can buy tons of stuff, a clergy colleague of mine overheard this conversation between a tourist and the shop-keeper. Holding up a jacket, the tourist asked, “What brand is this?” The shop-keeper said, ‘What brand would you like it to be?’ The tourist told him the brand name preferred and the shop-keeper took that particular label out of a drawer and sewed it onto the jacket.



Labels, like roles, are easy to “sew on” – Christian, Presbyterian, Minister, elder... but that doesn’t really identify the true cloth from which one is cut. What identifies the true cloth is not really us at all, but the one who we allow to work through us – Jesus, the Christ.



The devious thing about hypocrisy is that it is an unconscious defect of character. One never questions one’s perceived superiority over other people. One assumes that it is as obvious to others as it is to oneself. So, hypocrites are a double tragedy: recognized by the world for who they truly are and unable to understand why others do not give way to what they perceive is their rightful place.

But when we earnestly attempt to follow in the Way of Christ, a new opportunity arises – one of genuine servanthood. When we follow that Way, then we discover that the greatest among us is servant to us. We find that whoever exalts oneself ends up being debased. Whoever humbles oneself is exalted.



So, the antidote to this hypocrisy and self-promotion? It's with humility to recognize our own darkness and to follow the one who created us. If we do this, we realize quickly that no one, save God, is above anyone.

But be warned—it is easy to start out a servant and end up wanting to be at the head of the table. It is much, much harder to be a servant all the time. It is much, much harder to stay on the path of service. It is much, much harder to be a true leader after the way of Jesus.



Who are you really? That seems to be the question at the center of this text. Who are you when you are *not* playing a role?

I'd like to close with a true story. It took place at an English country house. Often after dinner, at such places, guests are asked to give re-citations, to sing, or use whatever talent they have to entertain the company.





One evening, the then famous actor, Charles Laughton, seen here, was among the guests at just such an event just outside of London. When it came his turn to perform, he recited the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, one of the most beloved passages in the bible. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want...” His rendition was magnificent, and there was much applause.

At the end of the evening someone noticed a little, old great aunt of the host dozing in a corner. She was nearly deaf and had missed most of what had been going on, but she was urged to get up and recite something. In those days people memorized a lot of poetry. So, she stood up, and in her quivery old voice she started, “The Lord is my shepherd...,” and went on to the end of the psalm, not knowing that it had been recited once before that evening.

When she finished there were tears in the eyes of many at the party. Later one of the guests approached the famous actor. “You recited that psalm absolutely superbly. It was incomparable. So why were we so moved by that funny, little old lady?” Laughton replied, “I know the Psalm. She knows the Shepherd.”



And isn't that what it really comes down to? Not *what* you know about leadership roles – but *who* you know and how close you are to Him. That's something that even the greatest actor can't fake. Let us pray.

Loving God, help us to live up to the high calling to which we are called – whether we are acting as official leaders in your church or are representing you to our family friends and community. Help us to see where we are hypocrites rather than authentic, faithful actors on your behalf.  
Amen