

# Reflections

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reading notes

NOVEMBER 2005—*The Happy Hypocrite*

In a chapter titled “Let’s Pretend” in C. S. Lewis’ book *Mere Christianity*, there is an allusion to a fairy tale with which I was not familiar.

The story is about someone who had to wear a mask; a mask which made him look much nicer than he really was. He had to wear it for years. And when he took it off he found his own face had grown to fit it. He was really beautiful. What had begun as disguise had become a reality.

Recently, I happened to be reading Frederick Buechner’s book, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy-Tale*. Mr. Buechner identifies the tale Mr. Lewis alludes to. The story was written by Max Beerbohm and titled *The Happy Hypocrite*. Mr. Buechner summarizes the story.

In “The Happy Hypocrite” Max Beerbohm tells about a regency rake named Lord George Hell, debauched and profligate, who falls in love with a saintly girl, and in order to win her love, covers his bloated features with the mask of a saint. The girl is deceived and becomes his bride, and they live happily until a wicked lady from Lord George Hell’s wicked past turns up to expose him for the scoundrel she knows him to be and challenges him to take off his mask. So sadly, having no choice, he takes it off, and lo and behold beneath the saint’s mask is the face of the saint he has become by wearing it in love.

The moral of the story and Mr. Lewis’ reason for making reference to it is this: we are not yet who we pretend to be (Christ like), but the more we act like Christ the more inclined we are to become like Christ. Virtue, by definition is the *habit* of right desire. Habitually acting like Christ will eventually form Him in us.

Some readers may be wondering what the difference between acting like Christ when we are not yet like him and hypocrisy is. Hypocrisy is acting in a way one never intends to become. The man in *The Happy Hypocrite* was a corrupt man who pretended to be a saint and became a good man. Thus the “Happy” in the title. (The book is worth hunting down and reading.)

Is this not the way it is for all of us? We begin our life in Christ acting like Christ while not yet being Christ like and as we continue to act like Him, He is formed in us. “What had begun as disguise [has] become a reality.”

SML

