

What Christians Ignore About Modesty

Are you modest? Do you cause your brother or sister to stumble? When you leave the house do you present yourself in a godly way?

Every single person reading just mentally jumped to clothing, without me having to mention appearance or apparel at all. There is a reason for it, too: modesty, particularly female modesty, is one of the most bitter and public arguments in American Christian culture today—and it all revolves around our skirts and our hair. The exact percentage of acceptable skin shown has been ascertained, the lines marked out on thighs and shoulders above which nothing may be revealed and the materials of which jewelry might be made has been parsed out. As a young woman in the church, it seems the only sermon or study ever directed towards me specifically regards my power to make men sin.

But what about my sin?

Stumbling Blocks

“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.” (Rom. 14:13, NIV)

There are dozens of pleas on the Internet, in magazines and from pulpits from straight men to the objects of their desire. They ask women to cover up their bodies so that they do not present a stumbling block for their brothers in Christ. This is a valid request.

It is not right to go to a brother who struggles with lust and disrobe casually or flirt sexually. But these pleas go further: they ask that women should guard against prying eyes

at all times, and they suggest the endlessly detailed standards with which we have all become familiar in the modern church. In this way, without ever thinking it of themselves, they put a stumbling block in front of their sisters in Christ. That is also not right.

If the weight of my testimony as a child of God rests on my physical body, then I become an object of sin. In this context, in order to fully participate in the body of Christ, I must turn inward and focus on my physical self, creating a barrier between myself and worship. The focus shifts away from God and instead becomes vanity. It is not only a matter of feeling blamed, or being unwilling to alter my behavior to help others. It is a matter of needing my walk with Christ to be considered equal to that of the men at my church.

Modest Is Hottest

Do me a favor and reflect on last Sunday. Try to picture any of the young girls who attended your church. Hair plaited back, a skirt that goes to exactly mid-calf, a sterling silver cross around her neck, glittery ballet flats, plain and pinkish makeup. You can probably call up the image quickly; I can think of quite a few.

Now try and recollect a young man from your parish. This image is likely a lot less clear and well-defined, but I imagine you thought of a couple of young men in pressed button-down shirts, then another couple of young men in T-shirts and shorts.

Did one style of male dress resonate as “immodest”? Probably not. But what about “less appropriate for church”? Certainly, many Christians would agree that one style of male dress shows more respect for God and His presence, a willingness to exercise humility in presentation. This hits a lot closer to what the Bible is calling us to when it says “modesty.”

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’” (1 Sam. 16:7, ESV).

In our haste to avoid the temptations of lust and flee from sin, we Christians often do two things. In the first place, we remove the responsibility from the one committing the sin (and forget the lust that women in the church also feel—there are plenty of immodestly dressed men in attendance any given Sunday). In the second place, we neglect the other aspects of modesty: the modesty of spirit, the modesty of faith, the modesty of giving, the modesty of prayer. We cater our outward appearances to be modest, but that is not solely what the Lord is looking at, and it is not the metric by which the Lord will judge.

Clothe Yourself in Grace

“Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you” (1 Pet. 5:5-6, ESV).

In my research for this column, I was able to find many resources for modest fashion, including common guidelines and arguments about stumbling blocks. But I wasn’t able to find anything on modesty of the spirit. However, when I searched for the individual tenants of modesty—humility, graciousness, meekness, a quiet spirit—I found a wealth of writing and apologetics and speculation. The problem isn’t that we are unfamiliar with these points. It is that we have shifted focus away from them, severing their ties to modesty and therefore how much time is spent on them at the pulpit.

In 1 Peter 3 we are instructed (like in many other places in the Bible) to not allow our adornment to be outward, in jewelry and braided hair and scandalous dress. But this statement is followed in the same breath with another: “[Adornment shall not be outward] ... But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit ...” (KJV). It mirrors perhaps the most beautiful description of what a righteous human spirit can be: the Beatitudes, where we are told exactly what godly modesty entails.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matt. 5:3-10, NIV)*

In reading that our nakedness is shameful and our pride is sin, many of us stop there and move no further. We seek only to cover or root out the wrongful adornments and do not seek to find the adornments that are beautiful before God. In doing so, we miss the beauty of sanctification. We are sinners, but we are also God’s children, and there exists in us every capacity to be meek and quiet and peaceable, hungering and thirsting for righteousness. A modest spirit is one of

reliance on God in our struggles and pains, and that is what I'd like to see men and women of God crying out for in one another.

*Reprinted with permission from . **Cyra Thompson** is a 22-year-old vegan housewife, with a laptop and a coffeemaker to keep her company. She has a husband, a son in heaven and a cat. She attends Calvary Chapel and holds no denominational affiliation.*