

What Not to Wear—Another Look at Modesty

Every Christian is responsible for their own decision to objectify another human or treat them with respect. If you're like me, you've probably heard both sides of the modesty debate—men versus women.

From a woman's point of view, we've heard men are very visual and it's up to us Christian women to protect the minds of men by the way we dress. We've been instructed to wear clothes in a way that covers a lot of skin and respects our body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. We've been told our curves have the power to make our brothers stumble so it's our responsibility to cover them up. Many times it's been presented as if our choice of clothing will help keep men on the path of righteousness.

It's no wonder Christian women are confused when you look at the mixed message the church has been sending them: "Look attractive ... but not too attractive! Dress modestly ... but fashionably! Look good ... but not too good!" Women (especially young, impressionable ones) can be left feeling ashamed of their bodies as they try to meet these vague, ever-changing ideals.

From a man's point of view, we've heard the burden of looking away falls to the man. In other words, temptation is everywhere, but with God's help it's not impossible to resist. It takes humble recognition of male weakness and real determination to think about the female body the way God does. But it does require vigilance, obedience and occasional confession and repentance. Meanwhile, men have also been told that they need to dress modestly too, in ways that won't make women stumble!

So which of these viewpoints is right?

Lust vs. Attraction

I think both are right. To put the responsibility heavily on one or the other gender is burdensome and incorrect.

God made men and women for each other. It's natural for them to be attracted to one another. Attraction between the sexes is a normal biological response.

But lust is an entirely different matter. It's a product of the enemy, a perversion of what God created. Lust obsesses on natural, God-given attraction until it turns into a sense of ownership or a drive to conquer.

In Matthew 5:28, when Jesus said, "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (NKJV), He used the same word we find in the Ten Commandments that refers to a person who covets his neighbor's property. Lust takes attraction and perverts it into coveting, as though a woman's body was a piece of property. Notice Jesus didn't say, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart—so ladies, be sure to dress more modestly." No, Jesus placed the responsibility for lust on the person doing the lusting, and rightly so! Every Christian is responsible for their own decision to objectify another human or treat them with respect.

So this issue of modesty really boils down to a matter of the heart, and there are two crucial things that must be addressed: holiness and walking in love. These are choices Christian men and women can—and should—make every day. When we choose to live and emulate a holy lifestyle and to walk in love with each other, the issue of modesty is taken care of.

What's the Deal With Holiness?

I realize that word *holiness* is not very popular these days, but it's biblical. That means God has written it in His Word for a reason. And anything that God sets forth in His Word should be looked upon as good news. Because it is!

Living a holy life is good news. It's the way God has called us to live, and it has great rewards. We can't expect to walk in God's power, be a light to the lost, get our prayers answered and walk through storms victoriously if we're not living the life He's called us to live.

So, what is holiness? Does it mean wearing long sleeves, no makeup and no jewelry? Does it mean having absolutely no fun and living like a monk? No.

W.E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* describes *holiness* as "separation to God" and "conduct befitting those so separated." It goes on to describe "the quality of 'holiness' in personal conduct." In other words, the emphasis is on conduct.

One definition of *modesty* in Merriam-Webster's dictionary is "propriety in dress, speech or conduct." Again it's talking about conduct. So I think we're safe to say that modesty and holiness are focused on how we *act*.

Should we act like Christians? I believe we should. And what does that look like? I think we know! It doesn't mean acting like the world—acting in inappropriate ways that don't glorify God.

I've heard Christians say, "It doesn't matter how I act. God loves me unconditionally. I'm saved by grace and the completed work of Christ." It's completely true that we are completely saved by grace (Eph. 2:8) and that God loves us without condition (Eph. 2:4). But it's also true that our behavior matters!

A quick read through chapters 4-6 of Ephesians gives us an

idea of how God wants us to live. Paul tells us to “walk worthy of [our] calling” (4:1), to put off our “old sinful nature ... which is corrupted by lust” (4:22, NLT), to “stop lying” (4:25, LB), to “have no fellowship with ... darkness” (5:11, NKJV), to “submit to one another” (5:21) and to be obedient (6:1, 5).

Add to that Paul’s admonition in 1 Timothy 2:9 to “dress modestly, with decency and propriety” (NIV), and you see once again that all of the instructions have to do with our conduct. Yes, we are saved by grace, but here is what we’re supposed to *do* now that grace saved us: Live a life of holiness, one in which our conduct glorifies God, attracts the lost and sets an example to those around us. It matters how we act in our daily lives!

I believe when both men and women get a firm handle on biblical conduct, living the way the Bible instructs us to live, it will set the modesty issue in a much more manageable context.

What Does It Mean to Walk in Love?

When we’re talking about modesty, the real issue is how our conduct—our clothes, our conversation, our way of life—affects others. Ephesians 5 gives us a snapshot of how to do it: “Therefore be imitators of God. ... And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us” (vv. 1-2, NKJV).

How do we imitate God? We walk in love as Christ did. And how did Christ love us? He gave Himself for us. We can see here that love *gives*. Love lays down its own rights and its own ways for the sake of someone else. Love thinks of the other person before itself.

For example, in this context of dressing and behaving modestly, we have a choice to walk in love or to have our own way. We can say, “I’ll wear whatever I want because I want to look good! Don’t be prudish or put that bondage on me.” Or we

can say, "How will this affect someone else? I will put them first."

I like the way one Christian dad put it: *"Modesty is the loving prerogative of the mature."*

The real foundation for dressing and conducting ourselves modestly comes from Romans 14, which speaks of accepting those whose faith is weaker than our own and not doing anything that would cause them to stumble, even if the thing you want to do is not inherently sinful (vv. 1-4, 13-21).

Paul is talking about food in these verses, but he's emphasizing a broader principle that can be applied to conducting ourselves modestly. He's pointing out that as Christians, we do some things not because we are required, but just for the sake of others.

I realize this is hard for us independent Americans to swallow because we value personal liberty above all else. But as we renew our minds with the Word of God, we begin to see that as Christians, our choice to live holy and walk in love is how we imitate our heavenly Father and how we reach out to a lost and dying world.

The apostle Paul is telling us to do whatever we can to help our brothers and sisters from stumbling. This passage isn't really even talking about how we have to dress or act—Paul's not saying that eating the right foods (or in the case we're talking about here, the right clothes) is a compulsory action. He's saying instead that considering what you eat or drink (or wear) is something we can consciously do *for others*—not because we have to but because we want to.

For a woman, that means we don't *have* to dress modestly, but when we do, we might be helping someone. Modesty is best described not as a "have to," motivated by force or blame, but as a conscious decision based on strength and love.

As Christians we are all responsible for resisting our own temptation, for renewing our minds, for looking away from the computer or movie screen when provocative scenes pop up. And we need to realize this applies to men as much as women. Men have an equal responsibility to cover themselves modestly—again, not because they *have* to, but because they love their sisters enough to curtail the freedoms they have.

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