

Judging by Appearances

by Linda S. Mintle, Ph.D.

Fifty years ago, famous novelist Ralph Ellison wrote about being black: "I am ... because people refuse to see they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me." His description applies equally well to those single people who believe they are disenfranchised because they are unattractive.

In today's world, beauty is a highly desired commodity. Even though most of us don't measure up to media standards for great looks, we believe physical beauty brings happiness. Despite the efforts of feminists, women still define themselves based on physical appearance. Those who don't score high on the cultural beauty scale deal with rejection more than those who do.

Beauty is an advantage in our society. That's why people spend billions of dollars on plastic surgery. But what happens when you, like most of us, aren't one of the "beautiful people"?

A reader from Utah expresses this dilemma. "I am an unmarried Christian woman with a female roommate. People often misjudge me based on my looks and living arrangement. I am not very pretty. I wear thick glasses that don't lend to contacts. I would like to be married, but so far there is no one interested in me. Would it be wrong to ask God to make me prettier? And how do I handle the unkind comments people make?"

People inside and outside the church do make judgments based on looks and marital status. Early on girls learn the lesson that appearance matters. Women internalize messages from magazines and other media that often lead to a preoccupation with beauty and attaining the perfect body. But asking God to

make you prettier isn't the answer.

My advice to you and others in similar situations is to take the following steps.

Maximize what God has given you. Get a stylish haircut and eyeglass frames. Use makeup to enhance your skin and facial features. Dress in ways that flatter your shape and frame.

Exercise and keep your weight within a healthy range. Do all of this for you, not some potential boyfriend. You will feel more confident and more attractive.

Avoid comparing yourself with others. This is very hard to do when bombarded by nonstop images of glamour. But remember that pictures of models and movie stars are often computer-altered and airbrushed. Most women have to learn to accept the body they were given—imperfect as it is.

Concentrate on character. As trite as it sounds, inner beauty is more important in the long run than outer beauty. Physical beauty fades, but godly character makes people beautiful. It is not uncommon to hear couples talk about attractions that grew over time because of the inner beauty they saw in each other.

Realize that your self-worth comes from God. If you know how God sees you, it matters less what other people think. Your identity must be grounded in Him regardless of appearance. To Him, you are beautiful. He did not make a mistake when He made you. You are a result of His handiwork (see Eph. 2:10). You are wonderfully made (see Ps. 139:14). He loves you just as you are (see John 3:16). You are His child (see John 1:12).

Practice being assertive. When people make hurtful comments, let them know their words hurt. Speak up in a gentle but assertive manner. For example, the next time someone insinuates you are gay because you are unmarried and live with another single woman, say, "That insinuation hurts" or "Please

don't judge me. You don't even know me. Instead, ask how you can pray for me."

A woman who is pretty does have an initial advantage meeting men, but beauty does not guarantee relationship success, high self-esteem or an interesting personality. Those things must be cultivated over time.

Focus on the things you can control, and work on those. And remember, inner joy and peace always are reflected outwardly. Confidence shines when you truly know who you are in Christ. In today's world, nothing could be more attractive.