

Modesty and Lust

M. W. Bassford, 6-5-11

As a preacher, there are times when I preach a sermon because I want to, and times when I preach a sermon because I have to. Obviously, the first is far and away the kind of sermon that I prefer. There are so many wonderful things in the Bible to talk about, so many ways that all of us can grow as disciples of Jesus, that I would much rather discuss those things. However, sometimes circumstances move me to preach on a distasteful but necessary topic, and as much as I would prefer to avoid the topic, if I did, I would not be faithful to my responsibility as a gospel preacher.

I fear that we have reached that point with respect to the immodest dress that some Christians have been wearing in the assembly. When it comes to my favorite sermon topics, modesty is right down there at the bottom of the list with pornography. It's a sensitive topic, and I've heard an awful lot of modesty sermons that have a lot to do with some preacher getting up on his high horse and imposing his think-sos on the congregation, and not a lot to do with the word.

However, we've had a modesty problem in the Joliet church for several years now, and it's getting worse. At the elders' request, I preached a sermon on modesty a year or two ago, and I had hoped that it would solve the problem. Obviously, it hasn't. When I'm talking to sisters after services, I'm regularly made uncomfortable by what they're wearing.

If this were just a me problem, I would have to deal with it on my own, but the Scripture makes it clear that God has a problem with it too. We need to understand this, and we need to live righteously. Let's look at modesty and lust.

Marriage, Lust, and Modesty

In order to understand how things should be, let's turn our attention to God's will for **MARRIAGE**. Look with me at Hebrews 13:4. In this text, when the Hebrews writer refers to the undefiled marriage bed, he's not talking about furniture. He's talking about the sexual relationship in marriage. This is the very reason why God gave us sex drives in the first place—to be expressed in marriage. When a husband and wife come together, that's a private thing, but it's not a dirty thing. Indeed, the opposite is true. Sex in marriage is holy and good, and it glorifies God.

It follows from this that sexual desire and sexual enticement in marriage are also good and God-glorifying. God made men to be visual creatures, and He made women to be visually appealing to men. When a wife reveals herself to her husband for the purpose of enticing Him, that is a fulfillment of God's plan. As long as no other people are involved, I cannot think of anything that a man and wife can share in together that does not please God.

That's the divine purpose for sex and sexual desire. However, we pervert that purpose when we **LUST**. Let's consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:27-28. Adultery is widely considered to be one of the most serious sins. Even people in the world commonly recognize that adultery is wrong. When Jesus labels lust as adultery in the heart, He means for us to understand that lust is equally serious and wrong. When a man looks at a woman who doesn't belong to him and imagines possessing her, that is sinful in God's eyes, period, end of story. No matter what a man's personal situation might be, no matter what provocation is set before him, it is always wrong for him to lust. If I come to the assembly, and I see one of my sisters, and I begin lusting after her, I have sinned, and I bear the responsibility for that.

However, it is equally important for women to recognize their obligation to **MODESTY**. Paul praises modesty in 1 Timothy 2:9-10. As we've seen before, modest dress for a Christian woman is dress that focuses attention on her inside, not her outside. Dressing in a revealing way is not the only way to be immodest, but it is certainly a way. There are things that a woman can wear that will naturally attract attention to her inside, not her outside. Let me quote to you from a blog post that Edwin Crozier, who preached our gospel meeting last year, made a couple of months ago:

Nathan asked, "What do you consider immodest in women? Rather than stating what I consider immodest, as if I can establish the bounds and lines of modesty, let me rather share what I have found to trigger my lust: Cleavage. Even the slightest hint of it. I can't help but wonder why a woman wants to let me see part of her breasts. I mean, if I'm seeing cleavage, I'm also seeing the breasts that surround the cleavage. Anything that draws attention to a woman's breasts or buttocks. That includes form-fitting clothing but also includes clothing with writing that begs me to look at a woman in those triggering areas. Thighs. Thighs definitely cause a problem. . . . Okay, I'm probably going too far and letting too many of my cats out of the bag here. I'm sure the sisters will think, "That guy's got a problem," and they're right. But there it is.

Let me say that if Edwin has a problem, it is an extremely common problem. I believe that most men, if they were being honest, would come up with a similar list. I certainly would. If the opposite is true, if a man says that he can see those things and not be tempted, that would make me wonder what else he's been looking at that has desensitized him.

I don't believe that there are any Christian women here who are setting out to dress immodestly and lead their brothers to lust. However, I do believe that there are women here who have accomplished that without intending to.

Three Principles for Conduct.

As we consider these things, let's also consider three spiritual principles that ought to guide our conduct. First, we should remember our Biblical call to **SEPARATION FROM THE WORLD**. Look with me at 2 Corinthians 6:17-18. Part of what it means to be a Christian is to come out from the world in which we live. This isn't a physical departure. It's a spiritual departure. It means leaving behind the way that we used to think and behave in favor of the way that God wants us to think and behave, and one of the areas where this change should be obvious is in our dress.

All of us know that the fashion designers of the world have no concern for godliness. Worldly clothing styles are often intended to present their wearer in as sexually provocative a way as possible, because our culture today equates sexy with pretty. Women in clothes like that can really turn men's heads as they walk by, but that's simply not a goal that a Christian woman ought to be pursuing. It doesn't matter if revealing clothing will make us attractive, if that clothing will also make us immodest. Such things cannot please God, and we must leave them behind.

Second, God's word also calls us to **EDIFICATION**. Paul presents this concept to us in Romans 15:1-2. When we're around other Christians, we ought to be looking for ways to help them spiritually, to build them up and make them more like Christ. This is especially true of the assembly. Many of us regard our worship services as a spiritual oasis, as an opportunity to escape for a time from the world, and we have to work to create that oasis, with what we say, with what we do, and with how we dress. It's no secret that the world around us is filled with provocations to lust. I don't have to spend as much time interacting with the world as many of you do, but I'm bombarded with those provocations too. The other day, I went to one of my favorite Mizzou fan sites online, and up popped a giant ad with a whole bunch of women in bikinis in it. It would be such a relief if I knew that I could come to church and be spared from such things for an hour or two at least, but so often, that's not the case. The same provocations that are out there are in here too. Can there not be at least one place on this planet where a Christian man isn't exposed to more of a woman's body than he wants to see? If the light that is in us is darkness, then how great is the darkness!

Finally, we must always keep in mind our **LOVE** for our brethren. Paul indicates the eternal nature of this responsibility in Romans 13:8. When we get right down to it, both of the problems that we're talking about this morning are love problems. Lust is sinful because it is unloving. When we lust, we take the beauty and complexity of a person who is created in the image of God and reduce them to a piece of meat. Likewise, when we choose to dress in a provocative way, we're equally unloving. We fail to think about the effect that we're having on others in favor of selfishly pursuing what will make us appear to best advantage. It is often the case that this selfishness has the greatest effect on those who are least equipped to handle it. Just the other day, I was commenting to Marshall about how I appreciated so many of the young men we have at church here. Their parents are doing a good job raising them, and they themselves are making the wise decisions that set their feet on the path of a lifetime of godliness. And yet, simply because they are young men, they are vulnerable to youthful lusts. Even a young man of such sterling character as Timothy was advised by Paul not to fight, but to flee those youthful lusts, in 2 Timothy 2. So if our young men are doing their best to avoid youthful lusts through the week, and they come here and are exposed to still more temptations, what hope do they have? They can't forsake the assembly, and yet coming to the assembly forces them into a battle the Bible says they won't win. Is it loving to put new and vulnerable Christians through that with what we wear? I think we all know the answer.

How to Help

As important as it is for every woman here to take responsibility for the choices she makes, even those who aren't directly involved in the struggle can still help. I believe that in this area, most godly women need counsel from their **HUSBANDS**. Paul speaks of the spiritual leadership of the husband in 1 Corinthians 11:3. The older I get, the more I appreciate how hard it is for women, even married women, to understand the effect that their revealing clothing choices can have on men. After all, they don't think that way about men, so why should men think that way about them? It's one of those ways that men and women see the world differently, and the man who is best equipped to help a woman understand is her husband. I can't very well tell a sister in Christ that she's dressing provocatively, but her husband can. This is not necessarily easy. I suspect that a lot of husbands are afraid of getting involved in their wives' wardrobes, but if we want to be the spiritual leaders of our households, that's a hard thing we're going to have to do. Sometimes our wives don't realize that they shouldn't be wearing something out in public, and they need to hear that from us.

It's equally important for **PARENTS** to take a leading role in training their daughters in these things. Paul points to this in Ephesians 6:4. If we want to train our daughters to be godly, part of that involves teaching them to dress in a godly way. Sometimes, that means doing what my parents did on more than one occasion with my sister—sending her back to her room to change if she came out in something that was inappropriate. It also means not pressuring our daughters to wear things they've shouldn't. On more than one occasion, I've seen girls and young women come to church in revealing clothes that they were plainly uncomfortable in, and I can't help but wonder how much of the outfit was their choice, and how much was their mother's. We need to be leading our children to godliness, not the opposite.