

Modesty

M. W. Bassford

5-3-09

Introduction.

- A. Of all of the possible sermon topics in the world, few are as unpopular amongst the brethren as the topic of modesty. Most of us shrink down in the pews a little bit when modesty comes up. Perhaps it's because modesty is a topic that is both relevant and open to a wide range of interpretation. Every time we put on clothes in the morning, we should be thinking about whether our dress is modest or immodest, yet the Scripture simply doesn't contain concrete, black-and-white rules that say "Wear this" or "Don't wear this."
- B. This causes at least two kinds of problems. On the one hand, there are Christians who take advantage of that lack of "Thou shalt not's" to ignore the idea of modesty altogether and dress like the world. On the other hand, you have other Christians, who see that lack of concrete rules as a vacuum and rush to fill it with their own opinions, which they seek to bind on others. They go around with their rulers and condemn those whose necklines and hemlines don't measure up, not realizing that their behavior isn't Scripturally justifiable either.
- C. In between those two unbiblical extremes, I believe it is possible for us to find a Biblical course. It is possible for us to study the word and come up with practical principles that we can use to figure out how we should dress. Those principles may not be as liberating as dressing however we want, and they may not offer the false sense of certainty that the ruler method does, but in the end, they will help us to please God and come closer to Him, and that's what matters. Let's search for these principles this morning as we study modesty.

I. Understanding Modesty.

- A. As we examine the subject of modesty, the first thing we need to do is come to an understanding of just what modesty is and all its nuances. Probably the core idea of modesty is that it **HAS TO DO WITH CONCEALING THE UNPRESENTABLE**. Paul brings this up, almost as an aside, in 1 Corinthians 12:23-24. This verse tells us something that we already know, that there are parts of our bodies that we don't want to go around exposing in public. That's why we jump and try to cover ourselves when someone walks in on us in the shower. This is a human impulse that is nearly universal. Although the precise standards can and do vary, nations and cultures from here to China have rules about what should and should not be exposed. That innate sense of decency and propriety is what the Bible seeks to nurture in us when it talks about modesty.
- B. However, even though modesty is concerned with clothing that is too revealing, modesty **IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST CONCEALMENT**. It is entirely possible for us to be decently covered, yet have dress and behavior that is immodest. Along these lines, consider God's condemnation of the daughters of Zion in Isaiah 3:16-18. These two verses are taken from a much longer passage in which Isaiah spends several verses doing nothing but cataloguing the different kinds of garments that the daughters of Zion were wearing. Their problem was not that their clothing bared too much skin. In fact, as far as I can tell from the passage, these were women who were covered from head to toe. Instead, their problem was that they were using showy, ostentatious dress to draw attention to themselves and their wealth. Brethren, clothing like that is just as immodest as the most revealing outfit we can imagine! Likewise, notice how God condemns the daughters of Zion for their manner. It's possible to draw attention to our bodies not just by how we dress, but how we act. If a woman is of a mind to do so, she can be wearing a flour sack and still be behaving in a way that makes her immodest. God isn't any more pleased with immodest actions than He is with immodest dress.
- C. Finally, we need to see that modesty **IS PARTIALLY CULTURALLY DETERMINED**. In other words, to a degree, our ideas of what is and is not modest need to be shaped by the time and place in which we live. Some things are immodest in every place and every time, but other things might be immodest in one culture but not another. Let me give you a Scriptural example. Look at what Solomon says about the adulterous woman in Proverbs 7:7, 10. He describes her as "dressed like a harlot." In our culture, we have definite ideas about how harlots dress. We start picturing stiletto heels and fishnet stockings and all the rest. However, in the time of the Bible, that's not what they thought of when they thought of the clothing of a prostitute. Consider with me Genesis 38:14-15. In this text, Judah saw his daughter-in-law Tamar and concluded from her clothing that she was a prostitute. However, it wasn't her fishnet stockings and stiletto heels that sent that signal. It was the fact that she had veiled her face. Today, in our culture, when we see some woman from the Middle East with her face covered, we don't see that as one bit immodest. However, 4,000 years ago, that would have been the single most immodest thing a woman could do. Culture can really change things.
- D. This tells us that we need to pay attention to the cultural messages we're sending with our clothing. For instance, in modern-day America, there is a very definite difference between dressing attractively and dressing sexily. We recognize a distinction between clothing that is designed to flatter and clothing that is designed to allure. Extravagant clothing aside, there's not a thing in the world wrong with dressing attractively. In fact, I think it shows a self-esteem that is healthy in the Christian. On the other hand, though, I can't think of a

single time when a Christian should dress sexily in public. Now, don't get me wrong. There is definitely a place for sex and sexuality, but that place is in the marital bedroom. Other than that, sexuality is not an aspect of our bodies or ourselves that we need to be revealing. When we do that, when we dress in a way that displays our sexual nature rather than concealing it, we can't help but be immodest.

II. Four Questions to Ask.

- A. Now we come to the point of the modesty sermon where the preacher customarily gets out his ruler and his Sears catalog and starts declaring certain types of clothing and certain lengths of clothing immodest. This morning, I'm not going to do that, and I'm not going to do that for several reasons. First of all, it's my job to teach what the word of God says, not my opinions. If I can't prove something with book, chapter, and verse, I ought not be saying it from the pulpit. Second, I think it's insulting. If I get up here and start telling you what kind of clothing you should wear, that means that I must believe one of two things. I must believe either that you're too dumb to read the Bible yourselves and make a correct application, or I must believe that you have evil hearts and will not arrive at the correct application unless I ram it down your throats.
- B. Third, though, I do not believe that the ruler-and-catalog approach produces either genuine modesty or a heart that is pleasing to God. Let me give you an illustration of why. As many of you know, Lauren got her degree from Florida College, and FC has a dress code for the female students there: how wide your shoulder straps must be, how long your shirt must be, and so on. In response to that dress code, many of the students spent their college careers seeing how close they could get to the line. They wore clothing that covered as little skin as possible and no more. Brethren, that kind of minimum-seeking heart is one of the most dangerous mindsets that a Christian can have! Why, then, should we make rules that encourage it?
- C. Instead, this morning I'm going to give us four questions to ask every time we look at ourselves in the mirror on the way out the door. The first question is, **"AM I DISPLAYING MY GOOD WORKS?"** This idea is taken from 1 Timothy 2:8-10. The overall point that Paul is making is that when any observer looks at a Christian woman, the first and primary thing that he should notice about her is her righteousness and commitment to Christ. When that Christian woman dresses in a showy, over-the-top way, like the bad behavior described in the text, that showy dress becomes the first thing the observer notices, and that's wrong. When a Christian woman dresses in a revealing, alluring way, her body becomes the first thing the observer notices, and that's wrong too. Basically, friends, we need to make sure that our clothing isn't getting in the way of our message. We're supposed to be walking, talking advertisements for Christ 24/7, and when we wear clothing that is extravagant or skimpy, we stop being advertisements for Christ, and start becoming advertisements for ourselves. Only if we wear clothing that doesn't get in the way of the gospel are we dressing modestly.
- D. Second, when we're standing in front of the mirror, we should ask, **"AM I SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE?"** Paul describes the power of the example in 1 Corinthians 8:9-11. Many of the principles that applied to eating meat in the first century apply to modesty today. Because modesty is an area where judgment is so important, no two of us are going to come to the same conclusions about it. Your standards may well be stricter than mine. When that's the case, I need to be careful not to dress in a way that will lead you to wear clothes that you believe are wrong. This is especially important with respect to our younger brothers and sisters. We know how easily influenced teenagers are, and we must make sure that our influence is good.
- E. Third, we should ask, **"AM I PLEASING OTHERS FOR THEIR GOOD?"** Paul tells us how important this is in Romans 15:1-2. In other words, we should dress so that we have a good impact on others. Lauren tells me that when she teaches high-school girls' classes on modesty, a comment that she often gets is, "Why should I have to worry about wearing revealing clothes? It's a sin to lust, so all those men out there need to learn to not lust, and then I can wear what I want." The problem with that attitude is that it's focused on the self instead of being focused on others. We shouldn't be indifferent to others' struggles with lust. Instead, we should do everything we can to help them by providing them with as little temptation as possible.
- F. Likewise, we should take care not to offend our stricter-minded brethren with what we wear to the assembly. We may think that Brother Thus-and-Such or Sister So-and-So is a crank who belongs in the 1950s, but we still need to look to please them with our dress for their good. For instance, there's nothing in the Bible that specifically bars me from getting up here and preaching a sermon in blue jeans and a work shirt, but I know that there are brethren here who believe that I ought to wear a coat and tie every Sunday. If I were preaching in jeans and a work shirt, they'd spend the whole sermon fretting about that instead of listening. I'd have everything but my head and hands covered, but my clothing would still be immodest. So what do I do? Every Sunday, I get up here in a coat and tie. No skin off my nose, and it pleases my brethren for their good.
- G. Finally, we should ask, **"AM I SEEKING TO PLEASE GOD?"** This question comes from Ephesians 5:8-10. This is the very opposite of the minimum-seeking heart we discussed earlier. It doesn't ask what we can get away with. It asks what we can give. When we have this attitude, everything in our lives is about God. We're on a mission to serve Him, and if anything about us, our speech, our actions, or our clothing, interferes with that mission, we get rid of it. If we judge our clothing by what God thinks of it, we'll always be modest.

Conclusion. If you want to seek to please God with your life, but haven't been, start on that journey today.