

Modest Apparel

Christians are called to a higher standard whether they reside in 1st century Corinth or 21st century America — and both genders are challenged. When it comes to immodesty, we live in a “war zone” where each day is a battle to control and conquer the mind. Women are confronted with their need to clothe themselves in a way that does not invite the lust of men (Proverbs 7:10); while men are told to avoid the lust that causes sin (Matthew 5:28). It is time for Christians to take a stronger stand, so we will examine the principles behind true modesty.

Modesty In The Old Testament

The human body is not evil. It was a part of God’s original creation which was declared to be “good.” And in the sinless and tranquil state of the original human pair, they were naked before each other and before God without shame (Genesis 2:25). Their physical nakedness was typical of their total situation in the garden. It was one of absolute openness and freedom. This was an ideal state which could exist only in the absence of sin. There was no shame in viewing or in sharing the joys and pleasures the bodies of husband and wife can bring to each other. Then came the fall of Adam and Eve. They listened to the false counsel of Satan and rebelled against the authority of God. When sin came, nakedness took on an altogether different meaning (Genesis 3:7). What had once meant openness and freedom now was connected with shame. So it has been in the eyes of God ever since that day. When God came to Adam and Eve in the wake of their sin in Eden, He did not tell them to take off their leaf-aprons so as to “recapture their innocence.” To the contrary, He indicated that they needed even more clothing than they had made for themselves (Genesis 3:21).

In Genesis 9:20-23, Noah became drunk and uncovered himself. God considered this both a sin and a shame. The question before us is to seek to define what it takes to cover human nakedness so that we can live together without shame. Nakedness was of such a concern that when it was violated, the son of Noah that viewed his father’s nakedness was cursed for his sin for the rest of his life.

In Exodus 28:40-43, God gave ordinances for the priest’s clothing. Though there was other attire for other purposes, in order to cover the nakedness of the priests, trousers were to be worn that would cover the waist and thighs. This was a specific area of coverage directly dealing with the covering of nakedness.

In the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 23:18-21), God compares the sin of Jerusalem and Samaria with the activity of a harlot. In this comparison, Ezekiel uses descriptive terms of a woman’s nakedness. In Isaiah 47:1-3, the harlot is one who is dressed with the leg uncovered. In dealing with nakedness, God, in dealing with the man, spoke directly of covering the loin and thigh area. In dealing with the woman, God spoke directly of covering her chest area.

Ever since sin came into the world, nakedness was a shame. God taught His people to cover their nakedness. He was very specific in defining nakedness of covering two areas of the body — the loins and the chest. This as a godly principle, applicable under the Patriarchal Age and applicable under the Mosaic Age.

Modesty In The New Testament

Three words in 1 Timothy 2:19-10 dictate how a woman is to be dressed: proper clothing, modestly, and discreetly. It must be kept in mind that although Paul is giving instruction as to how women should dress in the public assemblies, the principles will apply in other situations. If modest apparel is appropriate in worship, it is appropriate everywhere. If what is prohibited in dress is wrong in worship services, it would be difficult to show that it is right elsewhere.

Proper or modest clothing — the word here used in the original denotes orderliness, to be neatly arranged. It does not mean modest in the sense of being opposed to what is immodest, or which tends to excite improper desires, but what is becoming or appropriate. This means the appearance of a woman will not be offensive to anybody.

Modestly or shamefacedness — the word means a demeanor of respect and reverence toward others. It is best reflected in a discussion of godly character (Jeremiah 8:10-12). The reason these questions are so serious today is that we have forgotten how to blush. We feel no sense of shame. We do not feel what Adam felt when he sinned. Our defenses are brought down due to the abundance of the exposure accepted in our society. Christians even get bogged down in discussions of what is and what is not proper. If you have to ask, it probably is not.

Discreetly or sobriety — the word means sober-mindedness or moderation of the desires of the flesh. Immodest apparel of today is clothing that is designed to expose the body to the view of others. Such an exposure would have been disgraceful and disrespectful. One sign of worldliness is the devotion of excessive time and money to the outward adornment of the body. When you think of a godly woman, how is she dressed?

As Peter said in 1 Peter 3:1-6, when the heart is right, everything else will fall into place. The Christian should dress as to reflect their minds are occupied with nobler thoughts. Their apparel should be models of neatness and appropriateness. If the inner person is as God desires, the outer person in dress will reflect it. What is foremost in the passage is the appropriate ornamentation of the heart.

Some Objections Answered

Some will protest that modesty is relative. They argue that the sight of a woman's ankle might have been considered immodest 50 years ago, but today it is not. Others argue that people who live in warm climates and near beaches or lakes just do not have the same views on modesty that people living in other situations might legitimately hold.

Therefore these people feel that it is impossible to draw a line which separates modest and immodest dress.

The fact is a line can be drawn between modesty and immodesty. Whenever a person dresses so as to excite sexual desire in others, that person's dress is immodest and sinful. This principle reflects what the Bible teaches about modesty and does not change with the culture or climate. And anyone who is sound enough of mind to be responsible to God for his actions and mature enough in years to be an adult knows the difference in clothes which excite sexual desire and those which do not. Those who are too young and naive to know the difference have parents or older Christians to counsel them about their clothing.

This principle applies to men as well as women. The well-built, attractive male who parades his body by dress or undress is equally as sinful as the female who uses her indecency as a sexual come-on. And the unattractive teenage boy who washes his car in the front yard or bicycles down the highway in nothing but gym shorts is no less indiscreet than the unattractive girl who sunbathes on the beach or walks the streets in a pair of immodest shorts.

It cannot be wrong for a girl to wear a bikini at the lake and right for her to wear one as part of the competition in a beauty contest. It cannot be wrong for her to wear a skirt to Bible class which reveals way too much and right to wear one as a cheerleader which reveals the same amount or perhaps more. If we are going to plead for modesty, let us plead for it at all places and in all situations.

Christians Know The Perils Of Immodesty

A husband and father who is a Christian knows the perils of immodesty. Even if his sons and daughters are naive about their immodesty, he is not. It is his duty as the leader of the family to set the standards of modesty for the women in his home. He does not have his family in subjection if he cannot set and enforce such standards; he is not a faithful Christian if he will not set and enforce them.

A wife and mother who is a Christian knows the enticing nature of clothing. She must first set a good example of personal modesty before her sons and daughters. She must then see to the wardrobes of her children so as to teach them to be modest. Parents, do not deceive yourselves a moment longer thinking that your children will love you more or feel closer to you as a parent if you let them live loosely. How many teenage boys and girls have you heard say their parents "don't care what I do?" They say it with contempt in their voices, not admiration!

A young man who is a Christian knows the effect immodest clothing has on him and his friends. An adolescent male has a difficult enough time with the frustrating sexual stirrings he is experiencing for the first time. Add to that the pressures and enticements of a sex-oriented society where fashion is deliberately designed to stimulate those desires to an even greater level and the result is an intense and cruel temptation. A young man who is pure in heart himself does not want to see his sisters in Christ

expose themselves to the gaze of people around them so as to become the objects of their evil lust. Neither does he want them to make his own holy life more difficult. Surely it is easier for us to wear modest clothing than for us to have to pluck out our eyes (Mark 9:43-49).

Finally, a young lady who is a Christian knows the power of clothing to “turn men on.” It is natural for us to want to eat, dress, and live like the people with whom we have contact, especially when we are young. But when conscience demands that we be different in our eating, dressing, or other social activities, we have to be prepared to exhibit godly courage and keep ourselves pure. Are you exhibiting the strength of character which is necessary to live up to the godly standard of life to which you committed when you became a Christian?

May God help His people to exhibit His holiness to the world through modesty. The first step toward being modest is wanting to be. There is much more that could be said, but the important point is to investigate your heart and motives. If you really want to please God and serve Him, you will want to be so attired that when he comes, you will not be as Adam and confess the shame of nakedness. Immodest apparel is a sin that brings on so many other sins.

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