

# Contending for Modesty

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We are living in a time of moral confusion, and our generation's immorality is reflected in many of today's styles. Today's fashion industry has little regard for modesty, and its products often project a look that is inappropriate for someone who wants to mirror Christ.

The marvelous grace of God in our hearts compels us to reflect His holiness in the part of our being that other people see. When a person becomes a Christian, his experience changes every facet his life-not just the inward person but the outward person as well.

- **A Biblical Principle**

The Bible instructs us to wear modest clothing, that is, clothing with a godly appearance. Of course, our outward appearance cannot substitute for inward holiness. Adam and Eve covered themselves with fig leaves after they sinned, but God found their efforts inadequate. By making clothing of animal skins for them, He confirmed that they indeed needed modest clothing, but He also revealed that holiness in appearance must be associated with God's provision for our sins. Only by the death of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, do we obtain the righteousness of God that we seek to reflect outwardly.

God instructed Israel's high priest to wear "holy garments," for he represented a holy God (Exodus 28:2). God also ordered the priests to wear clothing that covered their nakedness and forbade elevated altars upon which priests would walk and thereby expose their nakedness (Exodus 20:26; 28:42).

Deuteronomy 22:5 enunciates the moral principle of a clear distinction between male and female in outward appearance: one sex must not wear styles of clothing associated with the other.

Proverbs 7:10 speaks of a woman with "the attire associated with sin and are not suitable for godly people to wear.

The principle that God wants His people to reflect His holiness applies to the New Testament church (I Peter 1:15-16). We are called to be living epistles read of all people, declaring to the world God's holy nature and His abiding presence (II Corinthians 3:3). Our outward appearance is one way in which we are an unspoken witness of the transforming power of Christ.

I Timothy 2:9 admonishes "that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamedfacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array." I Peter 3:3 gives similar instructions.

I Corinthians 11:1-16 teaches that a woman should have long hair, for it is her glory, and that a man should not have long hair. A person's hair serves as an important visible symbol of his or her submission to God's plan of authority and as a distinguishing mark between the sexes.

Revelation 16:15 uses clothing as a symbol to instruct the church to stay close to God: "Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame."

Clearly, God puts emphasis on the outward appearance of a person. To an extent, clothing reflects the condition of the heart, and it sends message to others about a person's values.

- **A Response to God's Grace**

Advocating modesty of dress and outward dedication does not mean advocating salvation by works. Wearing godly dress is not a meritorious work to earn salvation; rather, it is a response to the saving grace of God. The blood of Jesus is our only righteousness. Our salvation comes from God, never from our good works. To think that we could earn His marvelous grace by adhering to dress codes would be a terrible mistake.

But to accept the grace of God and then be indifferent to Christ's commandment for holy living would discredit His mercy. If the church preaches Christ and His saving grace without teaching biblical guidelines to live by, it leaves people open to confusion and failure. Deliberate and continuous disobedience to God's Word will lead to the loss of saving faith.

Who can view the Cross without wanting to conform to Christ? Who would want to continue his or her old sinful patterns of living when Jesus Christ died to bring deliverance from those sins? When people comprehend His holiness, they desire to become holy. While it is true that genuine love for Him restrains a person from presuming upon His marvelous grace.

In our success-oriented society, no one considers it odd if a corporation requires its employees to conform to a dress code. Why then should a church that teaches neatness and modesty for the purpose of honoring the holiness of God be considered narrow, restrictive, or legalistic? If we are to honor God in our hearts, it is consistent to honor Him with an outward dedication. I John 2:15 instructs us, "Love not the world", surely, then, we would be foolish to mirror worldly values in our appearance.

- **The Protection of Modesty**

Adhering to a modest, godly standard of dress and conduct offers protection from the surge of immorality that plagues our generation. Clothes and appearance transmit nonverbal signals. Christians who verbalize goodness and godliness but at the same time nonverbally declare sensuality and ungodliness destroy the effectiveness of their gospel witness.

The primary purpose of many fashion designs is to exalt the ego, attract undue attention to the flesh, stir desires, and ignite passion in others, thereby appealing to the lust, of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, which the Bible condemns (I John 2:16). If we are in such styles and with such motives.

We must not naively ignore the complex causes of immorality and marital infidelity, but neither should we ignore the influence that sensual dress has on adultery and fornication. If a man looks with lust upon a woman he commits adultery in his heart (Matthew 5:28). If people would dress in ways that do not provoke lust, the moral fiber of our society would be strengthened.

The danger of overemphasizing any discipline in the Christian life is that some people allow the discipline to become a legalistic code. Some people who harbor unholy attitudes such as hatred, bitterness, envy, and strife falsely think they are spiritual because they wear modest clothes.

Such distortions are hypocritical and wrong. But we cannot dismiss the need for modesty in dress because some distort it. The biblical alternative to legalism is not permissiveness or license but self-discipline motivated by grace, faith, love, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit. (See John 14:15; I Corinthians 9:24-27; II Timothy 2:4-5; I John 2:3-6.)

For the sake of our children, we must teach them to respect the holiness of God in all areas of life. Allowing or encouraging preteens and teenagers to dress in many of today's fashions is an invitation to social and spiritual problems.

A dress code will not automatically remedy the decaying moral fiber among youth, but it does remind them of God's commandments. We must begin somewhere to teach children and youth moral responsibility, and standards of modesty in dress offer us this opportunity.

When we honor God and His Word in our hearts and in our outward appearance, He places an umbrella of protection over our families. While moral decay sweeps modern society and many modern churches, we are able to remain relatively untouched. The world may scoff at our modesty, but we dare not lay down our cloak of protection and our obedience to the Word of God.

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