

Contending for Modesty

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 display 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 of his life, not just the inward person but the outward person as well.

Biblical Principles

The Bible instructs us to wear modest clothing, that is, clothing with a godly appearance. 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. Therefore, God made 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 priest to wear clothing that covered their nakedness and forbade elevated altars upon which priest would walk and thereby expose their nakedness (Exodus 20:26; 28:42).

Exodus 28:2

² And thou shalt make holy garments for Aaron thy brother for glory and for beauty.

Exodus 20:26

²⁶ Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon.

Exodus 28:42

⁴² And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach:

Bis. Jarret R. Spence

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.

Deuteronomy 22:5

⁵ The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.

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

Proverbs 7:10

¹⁰ And, behold, there met him a woman with the attire of an harlot, and subtil of heart.

The principle that God wants His people to reflect His holiness applies to the New Testament church (1 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 (2 Corinthians 3:3). Our outward appearance is one way in which we are an unspoken witness of the transforming power of Christ.

1 Peter 1:15-16

¹⁵ But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; ¹⁶ Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.

2 Corinthians 3:3

³ Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

1 Timothy 2:9

⁹ In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;

1 Peter 3:3

³ Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel;

1 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.

1 Corinthians 11:1-16

¹ Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. ² Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you. ³ But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. ⁵ But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. ⁶ For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. ⁷ For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. ⁸ For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. ⁹ Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. ¹⁰ For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord. ¹² For as the woman is of the man, even so is the man also by the woman; but all things of God. ¹³ Judge in yourselves: is it comely that a woman pray unto God uncovered? ¹⁴ Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? ¹⁵ But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering. ¹⁶ But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.

Revelations 16:15 uses clothing as a symbol to instruct the church to stay close to God.

Revelations 16:15

¹⁵ Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.

Bis. Jarret R. Spence

Clearly, God puts emphasis on the outward appearance of a person. To an extent, clothing reflects the condition of the heart and it sends a 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 Christ 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.

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 the 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. 1 John 2:15 instructs us, "love not the world", surely then, we would be foolish to mirror worldly values in our appearance.

1 John 2:15

¹⁵ Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

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 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. Such fashion designs appeal to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, which the Bible condemns (1 John 2:16).

1 John 2:16

¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

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 did not provoke lust, the moral fiber of our society would be strengthened.

Matthew 5:28

²⁸ But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

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. 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 Ghost. (John 14:15; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 2:4-5; 1 John 2:3-6).

John 14:15

¹⁵ If ye love me, keep my commandments.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

²⁴ Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. ²⁵ And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. ²⁶ I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: ²⁷ But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

2 Timothy 2:4-5

⁴ No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. ⁵ And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully.

1 John 2:3-6

³ And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ⁵ But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. ⁶ He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

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 the 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,

Bis. Jarret R. Spence

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.

The Church of Jesus Christ

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