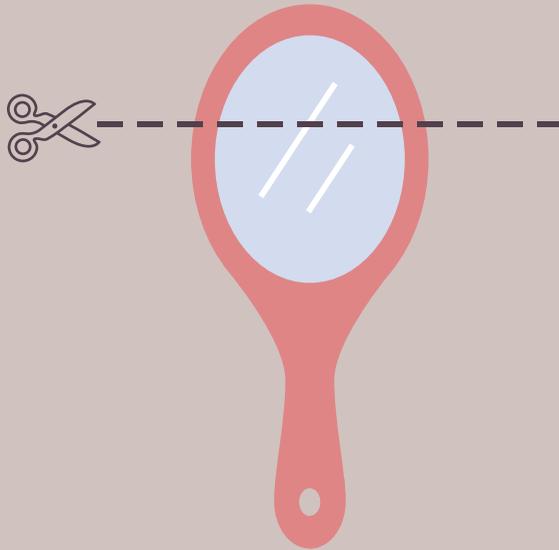


# Modeling Modesty



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The mention of the word *modesty* conjures up images of women in petticoats and bonnets. It has become an outdated notion instead of a desirable trait. Christians are wise to remember that modesty is biblically mandated. It is an attitude that starts in the heart and works outward.

As we narrow our look at modesty to the issue of clothing, it is easily observed that when women of the world head out in the morning, they are not concerned about appearing modest. Instead, most women are heading out hoping that they are in vogue, in fashion and not wearing last year's styles. Many clamor to be in step with whatever Hollywood has trotted out.

There is a popular discount store that boasts a line of clothing called "Xhilaration." It is targeted to girls as young as 6 years of age and it comes with this label: "There are no rules. Whether you choose to dress crazy or dress to thrill — make a statement, make a scene, wear what you want and it won't be wrong." That sums the world's philosophy in a nutshell. The attitude is "if you've got it, flaunt it; leave as little to the imagination as possible and as for modesty, get real, this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

I do not believe that regenerate Christian women leave home with this attitude. We seek to live godly, holy lives. However, if you look around, you will notice that even among Christian women there is a huge disparity when it comes to modest dress. A few churches are even using a written dress code for members only. If a church has a dress code, what does that tell you? It tells you that there are problems related to people coming to worship who are dressed inappropriately.

Think with me about some fictional characters who might help us explain what is happening among Christian women.

**“Clueless Clarice”** is a sweet young woman. Before dashing out the door, she just pulls something out of the closet. She would never think to invest \$6 in a full-length mirror to put on the back of her closet door. When she heads out the door in a shirt that is way too tight, is she modeling modesty? No. Is that deliberate? No, it is just because her mind is in the clouds. She sings praise songs all the way to work and is clueless about her immodest dress. Yet, she is giving a message to people she sees all day that is completely different than what she intends.

**“Disorganized Delores”** has four kids and is just plain overwhelmed. She is out of milk again and more importantly, she is out of diapers. So, she has to load up those four kids and go to the store. She is lucky if she can find eight shoes that match to put on them, let alone shoes for herself. She knows about the admonition in Proverbs 31 to “watch well over the ways of her household.” She does not have that down at all yet. She has piles of laundry in varying degrees of doneness, so she just finds something that she can put on so she won’t get arrested. She finds some shorts that she knows are too tight and too short, but she has got to get those diapers. She is probably not going to run into anybody she knows anyway. So she heads out the door. Is she modeling modesty? No. But, she is just too tired to care.

As a little girl, **“Stylish Stephe”** loved to play with dolls and put their hair up in exotic styles and dress them up in all the latest doll clothes. When she got older she loved to look at the fashion magazines and see what was in vogue. She always told her friends, “If I ever marry a pastor, do not look to me to dress like a pastor’s wife. Those long jumpers are not for me. No way.” Stephe is going to have whatever is out there —

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within reason — that is stylish.

For example, today’s colorful, striped, rugby shirts have a white collar and a white placket down the front. It used to be that you could determine how modest you were going to be because the wearer could decide how many buttons to fasten. However, today’s designers have gotten rid of all of the buttons. The shirt is now open all the way.

Stephe has got to have one of those because it is what everybody else has. Do you think Stylish Stephe is going to put some Velcro on there or even a safety pin? Certainly not! That would not be a bit stylish. Let’s be clear that there is nothing wrong with being stylish as long as your love for fashion does not supercede the good rules of modesty. So, does Stephe head out the door modeling modesty? Sometimes but certainly not always. There are many times she is living on the edge because fashion is so important to her.

These next three characters I will group together because they are very closely related.

**“Frugal Frances”** purchased a suit for \$20. She figures she can wear it 20 times — at a mere one dollar per wearing. She wore it five times before taking it to the \$2 dry

cleaners. She got her \$2 worth — they cooked it and shrunk it several sizes. Yet, she has to get fifteen more wearings out of it. So, she is going to have to wear it.

Frances has a good friend named **“Bargain Hunting Barbie.”** Barbie can be found at every clearance sale in town. She can sniff out those sales where clothes are almost free. She found a designer blouse in the most beautiful shade of blue. It still had the label on it. With all the deep discounts, it was down to \$4.12. She could hardly wait to tell Frances about it. Well, there is just one slight problem — the size. Now she is a large and it is a small, but that’s close. She is not even going to try it on. She has got to have it.

Frances and Barbie have a friend whom they try to encourage because she struggles with her weight. Her name is **“Dieting Diane”** and she is a “yo-yo” dieter who has in her closet something in every size from 6-16. This week she is on yet another fad diet. She has lost 5 or 6 pounds and is desperate to wear her size 12 jeans. Now the size 14 pair really does fit better and it doesn’t occur to her that the size label is on the inside. Since she has suffered hard and long she is going to wear the size 12 pair as a reward.

Now, when these three ladies set out, are they modeling modesty? Many times they are not. Is it a deliberate act of immodesty, or are they letting their frugality and pride take precedence here?

The next case is a little bit more remote. I call her **“Wanda and her Wardrobe.”** Every day since college, Wanda has written on her calendar what she wore that day. She can pull a calendar off of the shelf and say, “Oh, on September 12, 1987, I wore a yellow oxford shirt and khaki skirt.” Who cares? But, clothes are that important to Wanda. She is the kind of person who comes home from work on Friday and is already setting out

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what she is going to wear Monday through Friday of next week.

It is too bad she and Disorganized Delores aren’t neighbors, because she could probably learn something from Wanda. In the interest of variety, she is slipping some outfits in there that probably don’t fit as well as others, because she doesn’t want to be seen in the same thing twice. Instead, she heads out the door not really modeling modesty either.

Perhaps you have met a character named **”Postpartum Polly.”** You see, poor Polly is just sick and tired of her maternity clothes and desperately wants to get back into her regular wardrobe. She hasn’t quite lost enough of her pregnancy weight to squeeze comfortably back into them. However, she just feels embarrassed to be seen in maternity clothes when she had the baby weeks ago. In fact, someone even asked her the other day when the baby was due! So, Polly goes on and wears her regular clothes even though in so doing she doesn’t model modesty at all. Is she seeking to be immodest? No. It seems she has let her pride get in the way of her good sense.

The last one is a more serious case involving **“Hannah”** and her husband, Hank. Hank is a very spiritually immature young man, and he is in awe of the fact that Hannah married him. She is drop-dead gorgeous. He is just so pleased that she married him that he wants to share his good pleasure with his friends, neighbors, countrymen, strangers — everyone. He enjoys buying her clothes, and they are clothes that help show her off.

There are two ways that Hannah can react. If Hannah is also spiritually immature, she says, “Great! I can be the perfectly submissive wife, wear these clothes he is buying for me, and I am looking good!” If Hannah is more mature, she says, “Oh my word, I keep wanting to put a sweater on all of the time! I don’t feel comfortable in this, but he is buying them for me. It is going to be World War III if I don’t wear them. What am I going to do?” Is Hannah modeling modesty if she dresses as Hank desires? No. She is doing it with her husband’s blessing.

I call cases like these “accidental immodesty.” They are not deliberate, but nevertheless the end result appears to the world that, “these Christian women dress just like we do.”

What are the scriptural directives about modesty? There are many. We know that after the fall, Adam and Eve covered themselves but that was not sufficient. So God clothed them, as we read in Genesis 3:21. Deuteronomy 22:5 tells us that women should look feminine. We don’t cut our hair like men do. We don’t wear clothes that look like menswear. Does this mean that we have to go out in ruffles and lace all of the time? No, although there is nothing wrong with ruffles and lace.

The New Testament contains specific directives to women about this timeless problem as well. We read, “Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness” (1 Tim 2:9). We have almost an identical passage by a different author in 1 Peter 3:3-4. “Your adornment must not be merely external — braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.”

Notice that these texts do not say that women cannot wear braided hair or gold jewelry. They say that their adornment should not merely be external. Those who try to force the former interpretation have to say that it also teaches women cannot wear dresses either.

Perhaps we should commit these two passages to memory. Maybe we should write them out and place them on our mirrors or take them to the dressing room with us to be reminded that there are biblical directives and standards.

What about the way we dress for church? Let me be clear. If you arrive at church and your perfume arrived five minutes before you, there is a problem. If you arrive at church dressed in such a way that you have spent more time and effort preparing your clothing, hair and make-up than you have preparing your heart for corporate worship of the one true and living God, there is a problem. But, if you arrive at church dressed like you are

ready to slop the pigs on a farm, there is a problem. If you arrive at church dressed in such a way that by the end of the service the people around you, by no fault of their own, now know the color of your underwear and they have watched you do a shimmy dance as you try to get your too-short, too-tight skirt to go under you, there is a big problem.

Don't blame the men around you who happen to be unfortunate enough to be within sight and say that they need to get their minds out of the gutter. Proverbs 30:20 says, "This is the way of an adulterous woman; she eats and wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong.'" Ladies must remember what battles men face to stay pure as they are stimulated visually by women. They should never have it flaunted in their faces and to have it done at church is an abomination.

What started out as a well-intentioned move to counter ostentatious attire has resulted in opening the floodgates such that anything goes. It is very difficult for us to recover and to take steps to go back toward traditional Sunday dress. The fourth commandment is still there. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Many have forgotten that Sunday is set apart, and that it is not like every other day.

Another important issue relates to how successful we are as parents in teaching modesty to our daughters. So many mothers make the critical error of trying to be their daughter's friend instead of being her parent. Often, the first thing the teenager picks off the rack is something that is just over the edge. Then mom starts rationalizing. Her daughter is a good kid. She doesn't smoke or drink. She is going to buy it with her own

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money. All of her friends are wearing this style. Plus, if you say "no," it is going to ruin the whole mood of the outing. So she gives in and approves.

We all want our kids to love us but at what cost? When do we plan to start teaching them? As they are heading off for college? No, we must teach them early on that they must stand for something or they are going to fall for everything.

Suitable fashions for teenage girls are out there. Sometimes you have to look a little bit harder for them. Bypassing the juniors' department is a good start. Am I saying that my teenaged daughter cannot wear jeans, tee shirts, shorts, a bathing suit or skirts that are above her knee? No, there are times when certain garments within those categories are appropriate. Am I saying that never, ever, not even once can she wear a halter top, tube top, cropped top, mini skirt, skin tight shirts, anything that shows cleavage or midriff, hip-hugger jeans and shirts that don't meet, that she can't even go into an Abercrombie store, that she can't keep Clinique in business when she is 14, and that her Sunday clothes are going to be different from her other clothes? Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Unlike the discount store whose tags say, "there are no rules," her father and I believe

there are rules. There are absolutes. There is a line that you just don't cross. I hasten to add that it wouldn't matter if her father was a seminary president or a ditch digger, the rules would be the same.

Do I sound like an authoritative parent? Good. Parents are to love, shepherd and nurture their precious children but they are also commanded to teach and admonish them, because they are still children. They need direction. So many parents have the nurturing part down, but they abdicate the whole authority issue. They allow their daughters to go out and "go along with the crowd, express themselves and develop their own personalities," and when they come in looking like harlots, the parents throw up their hands and say, "She doesn't seem to think like we do about fashion."

Mothers of sons have often asked me, "What can we do? We don't have daughters that we can influence, but we have sons that are looking at how your daughters dress." Men of all ages struggle with this. It is our job as mothers of daughters to make sure that our daughters' appearances are not causing males to stumble or causing females to point to them as examples to make their cases.

Richard Baxter, the great Puritan preacher, said to women, "And you must not lay a stumbling block in their way, nor blow up the fire of their lust, nor make your ornaments snares but you must walk among sinful persons as you would do with a candle among straw or gunpowder, or else you may see the flame which you would not foresee, when it is too late to quench it." What a timely warning.

On the one hand, there is a world that says there are no rules and anything goes. Then you have some libertarian type Christians who cry, "Liberty, liberty, we are not under law, we are under grace. It doesn't matter. Wear whatever you want to." On the other hand, there are also some legalistic Christians who radically restrict what they believe women are allowed to wear. Finally, there is a wide area in the middle of Christian modesty in practice. There is great diversity in this middle ground. This is where our tastes and styles are reflected by the many different options that allow for us to express our preferences.

Where do you stand on this scale? Have you thought about it? Are you like "Clueless Clarice" who jumps over into that gray area sometimes? Are you a "Hannah" who thinks, "I should really share this gorgeous figure I have with the rest of the world," and are dressing immodestly sometimes in the name of generosity? Maybe we need to go home and with all apologies to "Frugal Frances," go through our closets and throw away some things that just do not pass the test.

Does God care how we dress? Yes, He does. He cares about every aspect of our lives. We are called to holiness, holiness in what we do, what we say, where we go, how we act, how we think, what we listen to, what we read, what we sing and, yes, how we dress. Scripture bears this out. Read Ephesians 5:8-10, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 and 1 Peter 1:15 for starters. May God give us both the desire and the wisdom to live lives that are holy in every aspect. A lost world is watching.

