

Travel Guide: Modesty - Adorning the Gospel
Bethany Assembly of God
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Central Proposition: You should dress to impress with the Gospel.

Introduction

As we continue on our journey to discover what the Gospel says to a variety of issues that most of us will face during our lives, we're at a very controversial stop this morning. It has often been a source of conflict within the church, between men and women, between women and women, and between parents and children. I'm addressing modesty.

I think it has been such a source of conflict because it seems so personal, it can be very difficult to pin down and so, it can feel arbitrary, and because the church has traditionally stood counter to the culture here. If someone is telling you what you should or shouldn't wear, it can feel very much like they are meddling, judgmental, and controlling and those are some of the labels that get lobbed at people who dare to address modesty.

Some ideas and applications of modesty haven't been done well. Embarrassing women by measuring hemlines at the door is one example I've heard. An overabundance of rules and regulations without any instruction of the heart or room for personal choice also seems like a legalistic burden rather than something that flows from the good news about Jesus.

Does this mean that modesty shouldn't even be a concern for us? What about the people who say that there is no specific guidance in the Bible let alone a culturally agreed upon standard? Since the Bible doesn't address hem lengths, neck lines, yoga pants, or bikinis, what gives me the right to say anything specific about modesty?

But the question really isn't whether the Bible addresses articles of clothing that weren't even invented at the time, but whether the Bible addresses the virtue of modesty and whether the Gospel has something to say about it. Remember that on this road trip we're not asking if there are some nice guidelines for these issues, but what does the Gospel have to say about them, and that's particularly important when we address modesty because it would be very easy to make up a list of modesty rules and tips that may be arbitrary, fail to take context into account, and worse, fail to address the heart. So, today we're asking, "What does the good news that God sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sin, raised Him on the third day, exalted Him to His right hand, and will send Him to judge the world and reign with the saints have to do with modesty?"

To answer that question, we need to understand what modesty is. In my experience, people primarily relate modesty to women's clothing, but that's too narrow. The virtue of modesty is a manner of relating to others through humility, deference, and respect. Bible translations don't often use the term modest, but the idea of modesty is frequently found in the Bible. Listen to how the apostle Paul teaches us to think about ourselves in relation to one another, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Romans 12:3)

And again at Philippians 2:3, Paul teaches us, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

Modesty and humility are related in that modesty describes how you present yourself to others through humility. It’s not arrogant, rude, showy, or sensual. Modesty is valuing other people higher than ourselves by how we present ourselves to them. With this definition, modesty includes clothing, but it is certainly more than clothing. It’s not just the clothing of your body, but the clothing of your heart. When you add the Gospel to this, the concern is not only that your heart is clothed with the values contained in the Gospel, but that your presentation of yourself helps to clothe the Good News about Jesus.

Look at Titus 2:9-10 to see what I mean, “Slaves must always obey their masters and do their best to please them. They must not talk back or steal, but must show themselves to be entirely trustworthy and good. Then they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive in every way.”

It’s not my intention to offer an explanation for the Bible’s teaching about slavery this morning. Suffice it to note that God was not condoning slavery in this passage but giving instructions to people He loved and had saved, but who found themselves within this common situation in the 1st century. That said, Paul’s instructions to slaves is instructive for modesty. He seems to indicate that there are more important things than insistence on personal autonomy or liberty. That’s a hard thing for us to accept and it will come up in a little while in regard to clothing, behavior, and our responsibilities to one another. Notice why he tells them not to talk back, steal, and show themselves trustworthy and good, even to people who may not deserve such respectful behavior, “They will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive in every way.” Other translations say that “they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

The words “attractive” and “adorn” are translations of the Greek word *κοσμέω*. It meant “to make neat, or decorate,” and it’s where we get our English word “cosmetics” or make up. It’s how you decorate your face.

We’re so often concerned with what people think about us, how they perceive us, and our appearance that the idea of giving up personal liberties, or dressing and acting in ways that culture considers less than attractive, and refusing to live by cultural sentiments like “you be you,” “be true to yourself,” or “do what feels good” strike us as puritanical and prudish. But the Bible tells us that we should be more concerned with the Gospel’s appearance than with our external appearance, not that we are trying to make the Gospel seem like something it’s not, but that by conforming our lives to the true joy and peace of the Gospel, our attitudes, words, behavior, and dress will help highlight the beauty of God’s salvation.

This brings us to the main idea of the message, which is that **you should dress to impress with the Gospel**. This is the foundation of Christian modesty. Modesty is not about legalism or arbitrary rules. That’s not an excuse not to think about modesty or not to have boundaries or listen to the wisdom of those older than you. It’s to point out that modesty starts somewhere deeper.

1. You can start by clothing your heart.

If you want to dress to impress with the Gospel, you can start by clothing your heart. While the virtue of modesty entails a desire to respect and help others, it starts in your inner person, or your heart. Lists of rules lead to frustration when they aren't driven by a desire to please the Lord and be like Him.

- Modesty starts with a sincere desire to please God more than people and to honor Jesus. We see a stunning example of this in John the Baptist. See these passages that describe him, Matthew 3:4–6, John 1:19-23, John 3:25-30. Here was a man so devoted to God's purposes for his life that he dressed in coarse camel's hair with a simple leather belt and ate bugs and wild honey. That is a modest life.
- John clothed his heart in modesty. It wasn't just something he wore on the outside. His modesty began with knowing who he was and Who he was called to exalt. So when people came with flattering suggestions, he could reply, "I can only receive what God gave me...Jesus must increase and I must decrease." That is clothing your heart in modesty.
- This kind of modesty only makes sense if you see that Jesus is worth honoring. If you don't, modesty will just be a list of unreasonable rules that interfere with your life. But if you see the worth of Christ, then you'll know your worth comes from Him. See 2 Corinthians 1:19-20 & 5:21, Ephesians 1:4, 1:7, 1:10, 1:13, 2:22, & 3:12, Colossians 2:10 & 2:15, 1 Timothy 1:16, 2 Thessalonians 1:12.
- There seem to be three main manners of immodesty and drawing attention to yourself: wealth, power, and sexuality. When you are clothed "in Christ," you don't have to try and gain attention through your wealth, your power, or your sexuality. You have what you need in Jesus and so, you glorify Him and graciously, He shares His glory with you.

Christian modesty is the virtue of making much of Jesus, knowing that He makes much of you, so you don't have to. Anything that gets in the way is immodest.

2. Your clothes can aid your goals.

If Christ is the goal of modesty, then we can legitimately say that your clothes can aid your goals. I'm using clothes both literally and figuratively, to describe both the attire you choose and your attitudes and behavior. See 1 Timothy 2:9-10.

- Paul was specifically addressing modesty to women in this passage. But notice two things. First, the problem wasn't that women's hemlines were too short or their neck lines a little too low but the potential to be flashy and arrogant in dress. They could be too concerned with demonstrating their wealth and status by how they dressed. Second, the antidote was being respectable, modest, and self-controlled.
- The words "respectable" and "self-controlled" are virtues that Paul also applies to the male overseers or pastors of a church in 1 Timothy 3:2. So, the call to modesty in appearance and behavior is not only for women, but also for men.

- Our ultimate goal is not to look good, but to make Jesus look good.
- Modesty also relates to our sexuality. While the Scriptures don't give specific rules about clothing, we do see that clothing can communicate something about intention and character. See Proverbs 7:10-27, Hosea 2:13, and Ezekiel 23:40. God's Word recognizes that clothing can be sensual or immodest in nature.
- We are responsible for glorifying Christ in whatever way we can, including how we dress. Megan Hill wrote concerning modesty, *"This also means we will do everything in our power to promote holiness in the hearts and minds of our fellow believers. We are 'called to be saints together' (1 Cor. 1:2). We don't want our clothing to be an occasion for jealousy or for lust. It may not be our responsibility if someone sins, but it is our privilege to help prevent it."*

What about the men? Men should dress modestly as well. But, typically, men's clothes and fashions are naturally a bit more baggy and provide a little more coverage. I think the larger concern for men has to do not with their clothing, but with their behavior.

- Often, men are immodest in how they present themselves to women. If we can use the caricature of women whose hemlines are too short and necklines are too low, then we can use the caricature of men whose demeanor toward women includes bravado and flirtation.
- The Gospel teaches us to act with respect and self-control, and when men succumb to base, locker room humor about sexuality, rating a woman's appearance, pickup lines, and a generally flirtatious demeanor, that is what the Bible means when it talks about sensuality and sexual immorality and it is immodest.

When it comes to sexual modesty, whether for men or women and whether in dress or behavior, I think the word "suggestive" could provide a good tool for evaluation. Ask yourself, "What does this outfit suggest about my intentions?" "What do my mannerisms toward women suggest about my respect for them in the family of God?" If your clothing or behavior is suggestive of greed, pride, or sensuality, it's probably immodest and won't help magnify Christ.

Conclusion

There's so much more that could be said about modesty. For instance, the way that Paul tells us to adorn ourselves with good works or the way that clothing can help communicate respect and enable others to see that you're more than your body, so that they respect you. Or the value of listening to older, wiser people when it comes to matters of modesty. Or the need to crucify our concern to be trendy and cool in order to honor Christ.

Modesty is part of a desire to glorify Jesus in every way we can. And so, as you're busy going to Summer BBQs, pool parties, the beach, and other places, be modest. Let the Holy Spirit instruct

you about what will bring glory to Jesus. Don't walk in the sensuality of this world, which is passing away. Don't make excuses that it's the style or it's really hard to find anything else or you'll look like a dork if you don't join the childish jokes or that's the only way to get out on the dating scene.

Instead, remember that you are in Christ. Make Him the goal and let your clothes and attitude aid you in reaching that goal.