



Defacing Beauty

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As image-bearers of God, we were made for glory. Not vain glory, but a glory that points beyond ourselves to God our Creator. Glory magnifies. It creates focus. It shines a light. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God...” We were made to do this with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—and with our bodies as well. Adam and Eve, in their state of innocence, were both naked and unashamed.

But as spray paint defaces a masterpiece, so sin defaced our first parents. Shame followed. Clothing became necessary to cover brokenness. Beauty was spoiled, damaged, and disfigured. We can now only imagine perfect bodies. The pursuit of physical perfection remains elusive for us all. The world is full of products, plans, surgeries, fashions, and illusions that promise to reverse or conceal our frailty and inevitable decline.

Moreover, because the first sin was driven by the desire to be “as God,” self-rule gave birth to endless distortions. Defining oneself apart from the Creator is the essence of rebellion. We want to “express ourselves” without restraint, to “be ourselves” without examination, to define ourselves without submission. We want no one to stand in our way and no one to sit in judgment over us. In our culture this appears in many forms, including how we dress. Many feel no obligation to others, no accountability to community, and certainly no answerability to God.

But God made us for community, not isolation. Clothing is one way we show honor to others. Modesty or immodesty affects our neighbor. Beauty or ugliness matters. Yes, we have obligations toward one another. Paying attention to how we dress can be an act of love. When we love our neighbor, we care how our choices affect them. We care what message we send. It is a matter of mutual respect. Some despise their own bodies and surrender to neglect. Others choose comfort as their highest good. Still others flaunt themselves in defiance: “Look at me—but do not dare judge me.”

It is always tempting to think the Word of God has gone too far and that we know better. We want to move the boundaries farther back than where God has placed them. People do this with alcohol, makeup, modesty, money, authority, and countless other things. Yet wisdom requires discernment in every direction. There is a ditch on both sides of the road. Legalism wrecks souls on one side; licentiousness destroys them on the other. Error always bears bitter fruit, even when dressed in good intentions. Our duty is to discover what God has said and conform our thoughts to His truth.

A woman is a glorious creature of God. She bears His image in body and soul. She possesses eternal worth and is to be honored and cherished. Like men, she has been marred by the fall, yet the imprint of God remains upon her. She is therefore called to adorn that image. Scripture plainly acknowledges physical beauty. Sarah was beautiful (Gen. 12:11), Rebekah was “very beautiful to behold” (Gen. 24:16), Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance (Gen. 29:17), and Esther was lovely and beautiful (Est. 2:7). The Bible is not anti-beauty. Beauty belongs to God’s created order.

Yet Scripture places inner beauty above outward beauty. It especially praises character: “Do not let your adornment be merely outward... rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 3:3–4). This does not forbid lovely dress or attractiveness; it establishes priorities. God values a beautiful heart above a polished exterior. “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband” (Prov. 12:4). “Strength and honor are her clothing” (Prov. 31:25). The Bible often describes moral qualities as beauty: dignity, wisdom, kindness, faithfulness, industriousness.

To reduce a woman to what she wears—or does not wear—is repugnant. Women are not objects. They are always more than fabric, style, cosmetics, or form. Yet what they wear can either adorn or detract from what they are. Immodesty, sensuality, or slovenliness can cheapen what should be honored. Beauty is to be stewarded, not worshiped. The biblical balance is this: beauty is a gift, not a god. Appearance matters, but character matters more. External attractiveness fades; holiness matures. The Bible honors feminine beauty, but crowns feminine virtue.

The brothers of the Shulamite woman in the Song of Solomon, loving their sister, sought to magnify her worth and guard her honor:

We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister in the day when she is spoken for?
If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver;
And if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedar.
—Song of Solomon 8:8–9

This Hebrew poetry recognizes something we all know: every time we dress, we are presenting ourselves. We cover weakness, frame strengths, conceal, reveal, accent, soften, and communicate. “How does this look on me?” is a wise question, if honest answers are welcomed.

Think of a bride. She is glorious simply because she is a woman made in God’s image. But on her wedding day attendants gather around her. Her hair is prepared and her face is adorned. She is clothed in a special dress. This already glorious woman becomes, in a sense, a “glorified woman”—her beauty is magnified. All eyes turn as she enters the church, and cameras capture the moment. We say, “She’s a beautiful bride.” And the Christian bride points beyond herself to the Church, the bride of Christ. Her adorned beauty becomes a testimony to His glory.

Much of our culture has forgotten how to read the room and honor the occasion. There is a time for casual wear, a time for work clothes, a time for celebration, and a place for sensuality within marriage. Wisdom knows the difference between a picnic and a wedding. Public worship is far more like a wedding than a picnic. Clothing speaks. It tells us what we think of ourselves, what we think of others, what we think of the occasion, and what we think of God.

Finally, when it comes to modest and lovely dress for men and women, wisdom must keep us out of the ditches of legalism and licentiousness. This is not unlike the difference between drinking and drunkenness. These are not merely private decisions, for we are members of communities. Our decisions about what we wear have consequences. So, ask yourself: What is my clothing

saying? What am I calling attention to? What am I distracting from? Your clothing often reveals the posture of your heart. Masculine and feminine remain helpful categories, as do modest and immodest. We don't need fashion police; we need self-government under God. Not too tight, not too low, not too short are useful guardrails. And when you look in the mirror and some doubt arises, then don't proceed; or else ask someone wise who truly loves you, "Is this fitting?"

For in the end, the deepest question is not, "Is this stylish?" but, "Does this honor God, respect my neighbor, and reflect a heart under Christ's lordship?" We must dress not merely to be seen, but to be faithful. We must dress not merely to attract eyes, but to adorn the gospel. We must dress as one who belongs to the King.