

Modesty Misunderstood

What Men and Women Need to Know

“Modesty” must be one of the most abused words in the Christianese dialect.

The idea of modesty has been almost exclusively attached to women’s dress, narrowing in definition to mean “showing less skin and trying to prevent sexual arousal in those looking on.” It has veritably become a subculture in Christendom, spawning a cacophony of bestsellers, brands, seminars, and internet firestorms.

In 1 Timothy 2:9, Paul uses the word *kosmios* to describe how a woman should present herself, which is translated as “modest” or “respectable.” *Kosmios* is related to the word *cosmos* and connotes orderliness and propriety. Paul also uses the same word in 1 Timothy 3:2, which outlines the qualities men need to have to be overseers, and there it is translated as “respectable” (some versions say, “of good behavior”).

Modesty is not just a woman’s issue, and the Enemy of our souls would delight to see us reduce it to such. Consider how he’s expertly used our largely male-focused exhortations on lust to convince many women to fearfully hide their sin from the exposing light of confession, or to delude them into thinking their hungry, wandering eyes can’t be lust simply because they aren’t men.

Likewise, our stripped-down definition of the weighty and fearsome virtue of modesty allows our Enemy to ply the same tired ploy against our brothers. Men have every bit of opportunity to be modest or immodest as their sisters, and that should be both a joy and a warning to them.

Offspring of Humility

“Modesty is not just a woman’s issue, and our Enemy delights in the fact that we think it is.”

Modesty is the offspring of humility. Humility is evaluating ourselves properly, with sober judgment (Romans 12:3). Modesty is behavior that flows out of remembering our true place of service, and does not conceitedly boast about the self, but boasts in God (Philippians 2:3–4; 2 Corinthians 10:17). Modesty, or the lack thereof, reveals where we’ve placed our identity. Rich women in the ancient world arrogantly declared their high status, their value, their identity with expensive finery. How do we go about boasting in ourselves today?

We live in an identity-addicted society. We strive to put our tastes and acquisitions on display so that everyone knows who we are. We’re told to accentuate our best features, get what we want out of life, stand up for and express ourselves. Social media is often the megaphone we use to herald our identity and covertly brag about our smarts, body, sexuality, culture, politics, sports, relationships, family, insecurities, experiences, and possessions.

Modesty Like the Messiah

Conversely, Christians are called to make much of Christ, to make him our identity. Our manner and appearance should be so empty of self that others don’t have to make an effort to forget what we wore, or our particular hairstyle, or what stuff we possess.

It's easy to see our immodesty when we contrast it with the human life of our Lord and Master. There was no fuss over his physical appearance (Isaiah 53:2). He laid down his life for those less important than him (John 10:11). He was submissive as a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). And expressed only what his Father instructed (John 12:49).

And he was God.

He was not the gaudy military leader the Jews expected. They asked Jesus, "Who are you?" (John 8:25). His answers culminate with the declaration, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). The whole world was made by and through him, yet he made himself nothing. Jesus was fully modest as he was lifted, raw and naked, on a cross.

I am. Do our lives proclaim him? Are we willing to be just another wallflower that clings to the Cornerstone, letting our presence here on earth only serve to draw attention to him?

True Modesty

Modesty in dress is a subset of modesty that needs to be addressed. Both Paul and Peter instruct women to not be superfluous in their dress so that no adornment outshines the act of modesty: doing good and not fearing what is frightening (1 Peter 3:6; 1 Timothy 2:10). Modesty, in essence, is to put on Christ (Romans 13:14).

If we're dressing "modest" to be the hottest, we fail to be modest. Women may cover their cleavage and thighs just enough, yet make sure to put on an eye-popping necklace designed to draw compliments, lovelessly nitpick the "immodest" clothing choices of weaker Christians, or post a meticulously posed Instagram picture featuring her latest workout or Bible-journaling session. Are we dressing "immodestly" in more subtle ways for accolades, approval, and attention?

"Just because I wouldn't dare to touch a spaghetti strap didn't mean I wasn't determined to be noticed."

I know that has been true of me. As a girl, I devoured every book on the modesty shelf at my local Christian bookstore. I grew to be technically "modest," with a conceited heart that was honestly anything but. Even though I wouldn't dare to touch a spaghetti strap, that didn't mean I wasn't determined to be noticed. Over time, the Holy Spirit prompted me to realize that my misunderstanding of modesty was not transforming me into the Proverbs 31 poster girl of the modesty movement, but instead into the likeness of the woman in Proverbs 11:22 (just the pig, no nose ring).

Value of True Modesty

Real Christians love to fade into the background, serving the needs of others, asking Jesus to take center stage. We've been freed to have a truly modest, nondescript life and countenance, which will make the world wonder why we're not fighting for our social status and incidental preferences. Perhaps we can be so liberated from human approval and praise that they begin to inquire, "Who are you?"

And we can respond, "I am not my own, for I was bought with a price. I belong to God" (1

Corinthians 6:19–20; Romans 14:8).

The virtue of modesty, in dress and holistically, is much more offensive, pride-shattering, and worthwhile than any “thou shalt not’s” issued by the religious department of the fashion police. It may indeed mean that a woman ought to decide to clean out her jewelry box, no longer spend hundreds of dollars on makeup each year, or discard clothes that are essentially a second layer of skin. But to say that’s the crux of modesty is a great disservice.

Living modestly is to proclaim what is proper, just like the orderly cosmos. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” (Psalm 115:1). Our true glory is only uncovered as we shout with joy about him.