

Money Modesty and Body Modesty

Money modesty means we don't display, flaunt, and call attention to our riches or social position through what we wear. Body modesty means we don't display, flaunt, or call attention to our bodies, especially in ways that highlight sexual appeal. Our primary call, as expressed in scriptural texts on modesty, is to adorn ourselves with a gentle spirit in the "inner human," and with generous good works toward those around us. Modesty of money and modesty of body are to support these aims. The texts I start from address women in particular, but the principles apply to men as well. They call for modesty but focus on the surpassing value of godlikeness.

1 Peter

How should believing sisters relate to their unbelieving husbands? This is the question Peter answers most directly with his words on modesty and Christian adornment. His answer forms part of a much larger discussion. How do we who belong to Jesus relate both to each other and to the unbelieving world around us? As free people who are slaves of God we honor all people, do good where we can, and follow the example of Jesus in suffering love. Peter fleshes this out for a variety of relationships: Christian to emperor, slave to master, wife to husband, husband to wife, or each believer to each believer.

"Respectful and pure conduct" may win a sister's unbelieving husband to the word, Peter says. She should submit to him in honor while showing him the better life offered by Christ. He continues: "Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. (1 Peter 3:3-4). This is the example of the courageous holy women of old, such as Sarah.

The call is to exhibit Christ through what is here called a "gentle and quiet spirit." Fancy and expensive "wearings" are portrayed as opposite of this spirit. This is partly because displays of wealth are not fitting among humble saints. It is also connected to body modesty as one way a commitment to pure conduct is demonstrated in a sensual world. Peter was keen that believers know how to avoid the "passions of the flesh (2:11) and that they have nothing to do with "sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry" (4:3).

1 Timothy

This letter dives into the nitty gritty of Christian living and church life. Whether Paul is discussing men, women, slaves, rich people, elders, deacons, widows, or heads of household, he is sketching a vision of godliness amidst our various roles and responsibilities in life.

Men, he says, “should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.” In parallel with this, sisters should adorn themselves in a way that fits with godliness. Paul describes this as “in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire,¹⁰ but with ... good works.”

While those words are directed to sisters, the themes are ones that 1 Timothy applies to all believers. Everyone should be engaged in good works, which are mentioned repeatedly in the letter. Self-control or sensibleness (*sophrosune*) is listed in the qualifications for an overseer. Interesting enough, even the adjective for a woman’s clothing “respectable” (*kosmion*) is listed as a qualification for church leaders.¹

Money Modesty and Good Works

Expensive clothing and accessories figure large in both passages. Christians don’t just avoid such things because they don’t want to show off their wealth, but because they have better places to focus energy and resources. Good works refers to the work of accomplishing good, not to the “works of Torah” discussed in Romans and Galatians. While good works include what we might call charitable giving, or volunteering, they also encompass the work of our daily lives.

When we think of good works, we should recall Dorcas of Joppa (Acts 9:36-42). We should remember that God will reward us for everything good, whether it is done as a slave or a free person (Ephesians 6:8). Within first Timothy we have the examples of bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the saint’s feet, and caring for the afflicted (1 Timothy 5:10). The “rich in this present age” are to be “rich in good works, “generous and ready to share” (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Honoring God and blessing others through our work is the primary ornament. Money modesty plays a supporting role. Throughout history Christians have employed various forms of simple dress. We can think of the habits worn by various orders of monks and nuns. Closer to our

context, Anabaptists and Quakers have often prized plain dress. While so called “plain dress” often becomes more about group identity than money modesty, and often loses touch with economic reality, we should remember its original spirit. We should think carefully about how to be “plain” in our context—wearing clothing that does not require an undue amount of money or energy and that does not attempt to keep up with or surpass the Joneses in our lives. Factories and machines have changed the way clothing is made and made clothing much cheaper. Ordinary clothing today often has features that would have been quite expensive and luxurious a few centuries back. However, those who want to show their wealth through clothing still find ways to do so.

Body Modesty and Respect

Body modesty is a topic that is, on the one hand, widely ignored in the American church. Christians are routinely clothed, unclothed, and decorated in ways that display far more of the body than is fitting for those who profess a resolute monogamy. Sexual love is for a husband and wife and this fidelity is not to be breached by flirtation or fantasies. Wearing respectable apparel with modesty and self-control means our clothing is adequate, discreet, and not sexually stimulating.

On the other hand, discussion of modesty is sometimes used to shift the blame for lust and fantasies away from the one indulging in them. Specifically, men are tempted to blame their inappropriate thoughts on women. In its worst forms, this treats womanliness and feminine beauty as itself a problem, while justifying lust and objectification. Jesus addresses men and warns them that “looking in order to desire” is adultery in the heart. This teaching is sometimes perverted to mean that when a man looks in order to desire this is (in general) the woman’s fault.

Let it be said bluntly that body modesty does not mean—and cannot mean— a total obscuring of all that creates the attraction between the sexes. If a woman dresses with modesty and self-control it does not mean that men will not find her attractive. A man must honor a woman by interacting with her as a person, and by a resolute rejection of thoughts that do not befit his relationship with her. Her femininity is no excuse for “looking in order to desire” or any other dishonor. This is true regardless of whether her clothing meets his preferred specification of modesty or not.

Scripture does not lay out precise details of propriety regarding body modesty. Passages in the

Old Testament speak of the disgrace of uncovering the thighs and other body parts, but there is no precise biblical definition. Cultural perceptions have varied. Some have argued that women's faces should be veiled for the sake of modesty. I will simply say that this seems to me distorted. Asking someone to cover their face feels to me like an insult to their personhood. It feels like treating women as a problem rather than honoring them as sisters and fellow heirs of the grace of life. On the other hand, I would encourage a definition that includes loose fitting clothing—for both men and women—that covers the body to the neck, the arms to near the elbow, and the legs to near the ankle.

With a topic like the definition of body modesty we need to be both realistic and gracious. Precise definitions will be controverted. Realism means recognizing on the one hand, that prescriptions of modesty sometimes come from attitudes that dishonor women and on the other hand that western culture is far too flippant with sexuality, flirtation, lust, and portraying oneself as sexy. Realism also means thinking about what is sexually attractive and how to dress ourselves discreetly. Graciousness means not using differences of understanding as an excuse to dishonor anyone.

Wear God's ornaments!

Never forget that the main point is to cultivate Jesus's humility and gentleness and be faithful in doing good. The reason modesty restrains certain modes of adornment is that those ornaments do not befit godlikeness. Personal appearance should be simple and sensible, both to save money and energy and to reflect a comportment that rejects sensuality and the pursuit of status through wealth and dressing to impress.