

## Meeting the Challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Culture

### The Challenge of Sensuality: How the Culture Views Display of the Body

**Intro:** One thing easily documented over the past generation or so is the apparent willingness of people to expose their bodies to others.

*In the course of preparing this lesson, I have made it a point to just observe the trends of both men and women in how they present themselves in casual public situations.*

I've seen the men in our neighborhood jogging or working in the yard with a bare amount of clothes on (not much more than their underwear and shoes.

I've seen young women in grocery stores or restaurants with cut-off shorts so short that the pockets which have been left intact hang well below the bottom of the shorts. Typically those girls also would be wearing some very loose-fitting sleeveless top with large arm holes that would allow one to see what she was wearing beneath.

*Prominent Hollywood personalities seem intent upon making a statement and pushing the envelope by presenting themselves in clothing that reveals as much of the body as possible, obscured at times only by the thinnest see-through material or no material at all.*

Michelle Malkin recently wrote a hard-hitting blog on Hollywood women's propensity to wear clothing that exposes as much as possible: *The problem, my fellow Americans, is not that we live in an age of wardrobe malfunctions. It's that we live in an age of dignity malfunctions.* (Michelle Malkin)

*In the name of style, people have been encouraged to show more skin. Fashion designers seek to build in sexual attraction through rising hemlines, provocative slits, see-through panels, plunging necklines, and clothing that is so tight and conforming to the outlines of the body that it leaves nothing to the imagination. And so there probably not anywhere we can go where we'll not be confronted with immodest dress.*

*But in addition, the media participates by pushing the envelope in what is visually displayed in movies on the big screen. The creators feel free to include not only "adult language," but also explicit sexual behavior with displays of nudity. This kind of entertainment so-called is becoming much more prevalent on late night television as well.*

*All of this presents significance challenges to Christians.*

### The Challenges for Christians

*The overt and even subtly suggestive displays of the body can serve as a temptation to lustful gazing.*

Both men and women can be erotically stimulated by exposure of the body of the opposite sex leading to the very behavior Jesus warns of the Sermon on the Mount.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27–28)*

So serious was this issue to Jesus that he followed up by saying that it would be better to remove one’s eyes than be guilty of this transgression:

*“And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” (Matthew 5:29, NASB)*

When Job sought to give evidence of his holiness he said, *“‘I HAVE made a covenant with my eyes; How then could I gaze at a virgin?’” (Job 31:1, NASB)*

These verses make clear that lustful gazing upon the opposite sex is no minor matter.

***The challenge for Christians is that as the society becomes more indecent in its clothing styles, we may become more acclimated to the displays ourselves and even become less aware of the sensuality of our own clothing and behavior.***

Because we are accustomed to these common displays, we may become unaware of how our clothing may affect others.

In the desire to enjoy the same experiences as others we may frequent places where revealing clothing is common—the local swimming pool and water parks, the beaches, etc. and even dress in the same attire as others while there.

We may rationalize that because we wear what others commonly wear there is no reason to be concerned. And we may rationalize that because others wear far less clothing our clothing must of necessity be appropriate.

***As we enter the discussion there are a few things to keep in mind***

There is more than one kind of immodesty; I’m focusing on what might be called sexual immodesty.

It is a matter of the heart as well as what we wear; but it is not just a matter of the heart with no implications for what we wear.

It is not just an issue for women, but for men as well. Both can be guilty.

God’s teaching on this issue is given in principle and not in specifics about what to wear or not to wear.

Teaching on this subject can seem threatening when a preacher gets specific about apparel that we may have worn or about places we may have gone. I don’t want people to feel threatened or compelled to line up with my conclusions (you will have to answer to the Lord for what you do, not me); but I do feel that silence on this issue motivated by the fear of offense can easily lead to a worsening of the problem. As

Malkin also suggested in her article, "*Cowardice is the handmaiden of defining decency down.*"

***So with these things in mind let's explore the challenge together from a Biblical perspective.***

### **The Christian's Response to increasing immodesty in the culture**

**How would we go about determining what is appropriate and what is not appropriate?**

***First we must acknowledge basic Biblical statements about the shame connected with bodily exposure. Clearly the public exposure of one's nakedness was considered shameful or disgraceful in Scripture.***

Only in the original innocence of the Garden of Eden did humans exist unclothed without shame. Their nakedness before they ate of the forbidden fruit was in innocence -- just as the nakedness of little children (Gen. 2:25)

But when the first human pair sinned, they became aware of their nakedness and felt shame. They sought to cover themselves by sewing fig leaves together to cover their bodies (Gen. 3:7). Yet even with these "coverings," they still felt that they were "naked" (Gen. 3:10) The Lord acknowledged their shame and provided for its removal by clothing them with a tunic that would have covered both the upper body and the lower body at least to the knees. (Gen. 3:21)

It ensured that the unique private parts related to both male and female sexuality would not be exposed to others.

And it was understood that it was wrong to expose these parts to the gaze of another. This is also confirmed by texts that more specifically define the condition of nakedness by describing what body parts are being exposed:

Exposing the buttocks (Isa. 20:4)

Uncovering the breast (Ezek. 23:18-21)

Exposing the loins (Nah. 3:5)

Uncovering the thighs (Isa. 47:3)

Laws were given to prevent indecent display.

For example, since men and women in ancient times wore robes that were open at the bottom, it was possible for them when elevated above others to be exposed to the view of those below.

*"And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it."* (Exodus 20:26)

*"And you shall put them on Aaron your brother and on his sons with him; and you shall anoint them and ordain them and consecrate them, that they may serve Me as priests. "And you shall make for them linen breeches to cover their bare flesh; they shall reach from the loins even to the thighs. "And they shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they enter the tent of meeting, or when they approach the altar to minister in the*

*holy place, so that they do not incur guilt and die. It shall be a statute forever to him and to his descendants after him.”*  
(Exodus 28:41–43)

Those who deliberately sought to look upon the nakedness of another were condemned as wicked.

The episode of Noah’s drunken exposure of himself reveals two attitudes on the part of his sons.

*“Then Noah began farming and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were turned away, so that they did not see their father’s nakedness.”* (Genesis 9:20–23, NASB)

Ham’s behavior brought his father’s curse upon himself; but his brother’s respect brought his blessing.

A similar image stands behind the prophet’s rebuke of Babylon in their treatment of the nations around them.

*“Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, Who mix in your venom even to make them drunk So as to look on their nakedness! “You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor. Now you yourself drink and expose your own nakedness. The cup in the LORD’S right hand will come around to you, And utter disgrace will come upon your glory.”* (Habakkuk 2:15–16)

The exposure of the body to others was not only shameful; but also functioned in the OT as a metaphor for experiencing the shame of God’s judgment.

Jehovah promised, through the prophet Isaiah, that the Assyrians would lead the Egyptians naked into captivity, to their shame (Isa. 20:3-4)

Isaiah prophesied that Babylon’s nakedness would be uncovered and her shame seen (Isa. 47:1-3)

The prophet Jeremiah said that Jerusalem “sighs and turns away” because her nakedness had been seen by those who once honored her (Lam. 1:8-9)

God promised Nineveh that the nations would see her nakedness and her shame (Nah. 3:5)

Only in the intimacy of marriage could a man or woman be uncovered without shame.

In defining improper sexual conduct Moses gave specific laws like this one:

*“None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 18:6, NASB)*

In defining fornication, Moses used the euphemistic expression, “uncover nakedness,” to describe an unlawful sexual act.

In contrast a man might be said to “know” his wife when they were together in a sexual way (Gen. 4:1).

And the implication is that experiencing the intimacy of seeing the exposed body of the opposite sex is only lawful in a divinely-sanctioned marriage.

And though we may be a bit discomforted by the frank language of texts that celebrate this intimacy, the Scriptures acknowledge it as a part of the enjoyment of marriage:

*“Drink water from your own cistern, And fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, Streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone, And not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be exhilarated always with her love. For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress, And embrace the bosom of a foreigner?” (Proverbs 5:15–20)*

**Conclusion: As Christians, this must be the starting point for our understanding of sexual immodesty. In our next lesson we’ll look at the how the principles relate to the challenges of proper dress.**