

Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century Culture The Challenge of Sensuality: How the Culture Views Display of the Body (#2)

Intro: Let's continue our discussion this week of another challenge of 21st century culture—the challenge of sensuality: how the culture views display of the body.

As we point out last week, one thing easily documented over the past generation or so is the apparent willingness of people to expose their bodies to others.

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.

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.

All of this presents significance challenges to Christians.

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

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.

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

Last week we pointed out that 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.

Laws were given to prevent indecent display.

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

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.

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

But someone may ask, "Sure, it is wrong to expose oneself to others; but what does this have to do with how we dress?"

We need to recognize that not only going undressed, but how we dress can enhance sexual attraction and lead to sinful lust.

We would be incredibly naïve not to recognize that what people wear can be seductive. How one dresses can call attention to parts of the body that should not be exposed leading to sexual lust. It is no secret that men in particular are erotically stimulated by seeing a woman's body or a woman in clothing that calls attention to forbidden areas. Solomon's description of the adulterous woman is insightful:

“And behold, a woman comes to meet him, Dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart.” (Proverbs 7:10)

The expression “dressed as a harlot” is not a t-shirt that says, “I am a harlot.” Rather it is attire that is seductive and that sends a sensual message to her potential victim. It is something that captures attention and attracts interest. It is clothing that excites attention to what should not be exposed and encourages the desire to see more.

So while the adulterous woman is using her verbal skills to entice her potential “lover,” she is also using non-verbal signals to seduce him.

I was intrigued by the account Gary Henry once gave in a lesson of an opportunity he had to interview a prostitute on a bus many years ago. Amazingly she was a married woman, but worked in one of the many legal brothels in the Las Vegas area. Gary took advantage of the occasion to get her perspective on women's dress. It was her business to learn how to lure men by how she dressed; and she described the ways that a woman might encourage sexual lust by calling attention to the parts of the body forbidden to be seen.

Simply Reveal them

Of course the overt display of private body parts would be generally rejected by most people with any modicum of decency.

And as a seductress, she regarded this to be the least affective way of attracting men. Her second suggestion:

Conceal them and reveal everything else

By revealing everything but the private parts of her body, the eyes are naturally riveted on what is not revealed.

This is the bikini effect, the sexual attraction designed in the garment is based on the revealing of everything else. Her third suggestion:

Reveal just a little of them

One of the very common motifs in style is this idea of giving a small glimpse to invite interest in the opposite sex. Here we might think of clothing that allows the opposite sex a little peak at areas that only a woman's husband should see.

A blouse with a plunging neckline or loose openings around the arms may attract sexual lust by giving the

opportunity for a male to see a little of the forbidden parts of a woman's body. Or a man might similarly wear a shirt and leave it unbuttoned.

A woman wears a garment that gives one's eye access to the thighs through a short dress (skirt) or through a slit in the garment that draws the eye to the exposed thigh.

Cover them tightly

One of the modern tendencies is to develop clothes that cling to the body enabling those around to see distinctly every contour of the body.

Thus what is underneath is exposed in form even if covered with fabric.

Both women and men can wear such garments.

Cover them thinly

This might be the most seductive dress of all, since it might give the most revealing look at what is underneath without actually revealing it.

So then, we need to understand the effect that clothing can have on the opposite sex, how even clothing can become seductive.

We need to dress for spiritual appeal rather than sex appeal.

I readily acknowledge that there are men and women whose basic impurity causes them to be lustful, even in the presence of those who are properly clothed.

Peter spoke of those who have "*eyes full of adultery that cannot cease from sin.*" (2 Pet. 2).

I understand that to mean that it is entirely possible that some men or women have been so captured by sexual lust that it constantly and unconditionally drives the way they see the opposite sex. Even women or men properly clothed might be the object of their lust.

However, we must be honest enough to recognize that we share culpability when we wear that which incites lustful gazing in the person trying to remain pure in thought.

A person can say, "How other people respond to what I wear is not my problem; it's their problem." Or sometimes someone may say, "But I didn't intend to send a wrong message? Or, I didn't wear what I wore for the purpose of causing sexual attraction."

One principle of righteousness often ignored in Scripture is the responsibility we have in causing others to sin.

Jesus, for example, spoke of the person who unlawfully puts a wife away as "causing her to commit adultery" (Mt. 5:32).

Or, he even suggested that if we are aware that someone is angry with us, we have a responsibility to

that person to be reconciled with them rather than allow them to suffer the consequences of ungodly anger.

The better approach is to dress in a way that accentuates who you are spiritually.

If you as a lady or man want those in your company to think about who you are as a person, then it becomes important not to sabotage that process by wearing that which draws their attention to the wrong thing.

By dressing in a sexually provocative way, a woman encourages others to think of her in way that she may not want. And, she may be subjected to unpleasant comments and aggressive come-ons. She may even conclude that “all men are jerks” because they hit on her, when she may be inadvertently sending non-verbal messages by her clothing.

But just as the Scriptures speaking an immoral women “dressed as a harlot,” so it speaks of a women whose clothing is befitting a woman making a claim to godliness.

“Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments; but rather by means of good works, as befits women making a claim to godliness.” (1 Timothy 2:9–10)

If a woman dresses modestly, a man can focus on the beauty of her character. He can appreciate her for her inner beauty. Because he sees that she has self-respect, he is more inclined to show her respect.

If she dresses provocatively, he is distracted from her inner beauty and is focused on her physical appearance. Her lack of personal dignity can incite assault on her dignity.

Conclusion: As the culture becomes more and more immodest or lascivious, we must remain committed to principles of holiness, even if that should cause others to think we are old-fashioned or out-of-style. Respect for God and self-respect are essential to preserve the sanctity of marriage and all its privileges and charms.