

Modesty in Apparel: Bringing a Believer's Attire into Subjection to the Word of God

Chapter 3: Modesty and Extravagance

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Thus far we have considered modesty in dress from the perspective of clothing that causes lust and attire that is appropriate for one's sex. Biblical modesty, however, also refers to a rejection of ostentatious, excessively showy or extravagant clothing. This point is established from the secondary meaning of the Greek word (*kosmios*) and the context of the word in 1 Timothy 2:9: "[T]hat the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but which is proper to women professing godliness, with good works." In Greco-Roman society of the first century, many women were obsessed with attaining extravagance in dress. Such a style was exceptionally costly and was to an extent expected of the upper classes. Coupled with this obsession was an attitude of pride and superiority that went with an ostentatious appearance. This "heart attitude" essentially said, "Look at me. I am impressive. I am better than you. I am great. I have arrived." This ungodly attitude has been common throughout history. In our day, high school students (especially females) try to out dress each other. In our culture many women spend an inordinate amount of time and money on their appearance. Given this common problem with women throughout recorded history Paul counters such thinking with a call to godliness and humility that results in modest apparel.

As we study the issue of modesty as it applies to the avoidance of ostentatious attire, there are a number of things to keep in mind. First, the Bible does not *explicitly* define extravagance in clothing. Therefore, one must carefully consider a number of passages that are related to this topic and make logical deductions based on the analogy of Scripture. This will require wisdom and sanctified common sense. Second, like our previous topic, there are some unbiblical extremes when it comes to modesty and extravagant attire. On the one hand, there are professing Christians who blindly follow the world's lead in this area. They spend money like there is no tomorrow on the latest fashions and dress completely beyond their station in life to impress their friends and neighbors. (While attending seminary in a large city, this author was surprised to find young men who lived in decrepit row houses wearing thirty dollar a pair socks, three hundred dollar Italian leather shoes and eight hundred dollar suits. Clearly, for some, *status* and *ego* take precedence over economic common sense or properly providing for their own families). On the other hand, there are those who teach that apparel must *always* be plain or even unattractive. There have been Anabaptist sects that forbid the wearing of colors other than black, grey or white. Others have forbidden embroidery or even buttons. In history, there have been those who have forbidden all lace, the wearing of any jewelry and any use of makeup on women. When one reads various monographs on this topic, one often will find neo-platonic presuppositions or the quoting of famous churchmen from the past who either give their personal opinion with no exegesis or who contradict the clear teaching of the passage because of their own assumptions. Given the erroneous concepts of Christian modesty and extravagance, we need to be careful to draw our principles solely from Scripture instead of imposing our presuppositions or ecclesiastical traditions upon the text. As we do this we will consider clothing

and the question of whether 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3-4 teach a complete prohibition on jewelry or only an ostentatious abuse of jewelry.

The key to understanding the question of attire is to compare a few key passages and interpret them together. In 1 Timothy 2:9 Paul helps us understand what he means by extravagant, immodest dress on women by prohibiting costly, elaborate hair styles (In Greco-Roman society wealthy women would have gold thread woven into their hair with things like pearls attached to the hair with pins), ornate jewelry (jewelry will be considered below) and extremely expensive clothing (“costly clothing” [NKJV], “expensive clothes” [NIV, NEB, Berkeley, Jerusalem Bible], “costly array” [KJV], “costly raiment” [NASB, Wuerst], “garments of great price” [Young’s Literal Translation]). The word “costly” (*poluteles*) means “extremely expensive.” It is primarily used to describe the very end or limit of something (from *polus* much, *telos*, revenue).¹ In Mark 14:3 the same word is used to describe an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard that was poured over Jesus’ head. Nard was among the most costly ointments in the ancient world. (The oil used in spikenard was imported from India.) In verse 5 we are told the spikenard was worth “three hundred denarii” which at that time was equivalent to a year’s wages. Paul is clearly talking about exceptionally expensive clothing. A Christian woman is not to waste her money on very costly clothes and she must not even crave or lust after such items.

In the first century women wore robes or mantles that, in structure, were similar to a men’s cloak or toga. The price of the woman’s robe would be determined by the quality of the fabric used, the expertise of workmanship, the amount of ornamentation (costly garments were richly decorated) and the amount of color variation. Paul is instructing women to avoid showiness; to shun the world’s vain materialism and cult of beauty. Believers are not to spend an inordinate amount of time and money on how they look and must reject an ostentatious display of wealth, sensuality or excess. Christians are to manifest moderation in dress and adornments. Their outward appearance must reflect their spiritual and moral qualities. While Paul is not telling believers to take a vow of poverty and dress like ascetics, he wants to make sure that their attire does not reflect the world’s obsession with money, power, or self-glorification. Thus, in contrast with worldly women who focus on elaborate jewelry and expensive, fancy clothes, Paul wants Christian women to wear clothing “which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (1 Tim. 2:10). Believers want to draw attention to Christ, not to their own ego, wealth or social status. Paul’s thought brings to mind the wonderful teaching of 1 Peter 3:3, 4: “Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—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.”

Since 1 Timothy 2:9 has often been interpreted to teach that women must always wear inexpensive, cheap, plain or unattractive clothing, we need to interpret it in light of Proverbs 31:22 which describes the clothing of a godly, productive woman: “She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.” The word for “fine linen” (*sheshiy*) indicates a high quality white linen product, not cotton or silk (the word for silk is *meshiy* which does not appear until Ezekiel 16:10, 13). The word translated purple (*argaman*) refers to a very expensive red/purple dye. The most valuable purple garments were imported from Tyre and Sidon. The fact that this woman wears fine linen and purple indicates that she can afford high quality, expensive clothing. This clothing was not immodest or excessive, given the high position of her husband (he is an elder or political leader in the gate [v. 23]) and her high economic status. The inspired

¹ See W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 244-245. Thayer writes, “very valuable, of great price” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 530).

author wants us to note that God has blessed this godly wife and clothed her in attire fit for a queen. Her clothing is not cheap or plain, yet conforms to the New Testament rule of modesty. Her attire was appropriate to her station in life without being excessive or drawing too much attention to herself. While it is true that her main concern must always first be on her spiritual, inward qualities (cf. 1 Tim. 2:10; 1 Pet. 3:4), that does not mean that neglecting her outward appearance or looking cheap or poverty-stricken is a virtue. Her prosperity, which flows from her love of God and His commandments, is seen in her respectable outward appearance. As Matthew Henry notes, “She has rich clothes and puts them on well.”²

Ironically, Anabaptist women and ascetics who see holiness in drab dress and who make concerted efforts to be homely or who look like they just stepped out of a time machine are themselves guilty of violating the spirit of these passages. Their drabness and odd dress draw attention to themselves. Their bizarre appearance, whether intentional or not, turns them into a display. Their concept of modesty which is informed primarily by human tradition and philosophy turns modesty into a form of immodesty.

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² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n. d.), 3:976.