

Rediscovering Femininity and Modesty

by Carolyn Mahaney

As Christian women, we must understand that our femininity is a gift from God and that physical beauty is a lie that promises happiness and fulfillment but delivers only emptiness and dissatisfaction.

Duration: 1:05:41

Scripture: Colossians 3:1

Topics: "Modesty"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by discussing the mystery of being and how the fact that we are born and survive is truly amazing. They emphasize that the specific combination of chromosomes that led to our existence reflects either godly or selfish motivations. The speaker then provides a heart check test with 10 questions to help listeners examine their thoughts, motives, and goals regarding beauty in their lives. They encourage self-reflection and the desire for God's glory rather than self-glory. The sermon was given at a conference on building strong families and the topic of rediscovering femininity and modesty is briefly touched upon, with a focus on cultivating inner beauty as women.

Transcript

This message was given at the Building Strong Families Conference held in Dallas, Texas, March 20th through the 22nd of 2000. This conference was sponsored by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and Family Life Ministries. Following the message, there will be information on how to order additional materials on building a strong family.

Thank you, Margaret. That was very kind of you. Well, as Margaret said, our topic is Rediscovering Femininity and Modesty.

Now, I need to just point out something from the outset. Considering that I have 15 minutes to speak, there is no way I can possibly cover this topic. When I was first beginning to prepare on this topic, the question that kept coming to my mind was, where do I come in for a landing on this one? Femininity is a very broad topic.

And, I mean, femininity alone is huge, but we're supposed to rediscover femininity and modesty in 50 minutes. Well, I think you'll agree with me, it just can't be done in this brief amount of time. However, there is time to consider a small part of this great topic, and it's that approach I'm taking this afternoon with respect to all the valid ways to survey this wonderful, great topic.

I would simply like to consider it from this one aspect, and that is, as women, we can enhance our wonderful gift of femininity by cultivating inner beauty. So will you pray with me before we begin? Father, we just thank you so much for this privilege to gather in this context. And, Lord, we have just been partaking of a feast.

And we just thank you for all that you have imparted to us thus far. And, Lord, we just continue to look to you for your help and your direction and your guidance on these issues. And so, Lord, I just ask this afternoon, I ask personally for your help.

I ask that you would enable me to impart your heart on this topic. Lord, I just acknowledge my need for you, my dependence upon you. And I thank you that you will help me.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, what is femininity? Well, to answer that question, we need to go back to the story of creation, as we've been doing again and again in all these different seminars, because it's there that we discover the inauguration of femininity. Its origin is recorded in elegantly simple language in Genesis chapter 1. So God created man in his own image.

In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. In Genesis 2, verses 21 and 22, we are given a more full and vivid description of woman's origin.

The Lord God caused the man to fall in a deep sleep. And while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

Now, we see from these scriptures that woman was the beautiful handiwork of the Lord God, our creator. Woman was God's idea and his invention. In fact, as we read the whole account of Genesis, of his brilliant creation production, we discover that woman was the finishing design of all he created.

She was the last act of God's creation. Dare we say that God left the best until the last? I don't think we can take too much pride in this when we remember who it was to first eat the forbidden fruit. The important point here is God created woman.

Being the creation of God determines everything for us as women. This means in order to learn what it means to be a woman, we must start with God. In order to determine our purpose as women, we must start with the one who made us.

We don't look to our culture to find our identity. We don't look to our feelings to discover our purpose. We are to look to God because it is he who made us.

Therefore, everything that we are and everything that we do must be rooted in him. May I also point out from this passage that our being born a woman wasn't accidental. It was not mere chance.

We were intentionally and purposefully created. Our birth was the plan and for a foreordained determination of an all wise, all powerful, and all loving God. Have you ever stopped to consider the marvel of your birth? Years ago, I read a magazine article that contained an interview with Edith Shaffer.

She was telling about the biography she had just written entitled The Tapestry. Listen to this excerpt from the interview. She said, In the first chapter of The Tapestry, I begin with a subject that has always held my attention.

The mystery of being. I have often felt that we concentrate on how people die. Yet the fact that any of us could have been born and survived is really more amazing.

It is probably true for most of us that if we had not been conceived in the particular month in which we were conceived, our parents would have conceived another child in the following month or two. But the fact is that in that period of conception, that fantastically limited moment, those particular chromosomes came together and we came into being. Other chromosome combinations could have taken place, but they didn't.

Ours did. It leads me to ask, why me? Why this particular combination that is me? The answer is that God had a reason for creating me. God does have a reason for creating you and me.

And he does have a purpose in making us woman. And Genesis provides us with a beautiful picture of that purpose. Now I'd like to make one final observation about our origin as woman.

And that is God created male and female. Not male and male. Not female and female.

But male and female, he created them. God made man and woman different. When God created us woman, he made us a fully feminine creature.

We did not become feminine. We were born feminine. You and I did not become feminine because someone gave us a doll and put a dress on us.

We were created feminine. See, the feminist doctrine of our society upholds the notion that femininity is all a matter of cultural conditioning. Many feminists argue that the only essential difference between men and women is our anatomy.

They claim we weren't born differently. It was just our upbringing that created the differences. Genesis 1 teaches otherwise.

God created male and female. As women, we are distinctly female. Innately feminine.

Not because of the way we've been trained. Not because of the culture. But because God created us that way.

Our femininity is a gift of grace from a loving God. Now, there is just so much more wonderful truth that is contained in these first few chapters of Genesis regarding our femininity. However, I'm not going to take any more time to elaborate on the creation account, because given the audience I am speaking to, I'm confident you know the story well, not to mention that you're already receiving excellent biblical teaching on this topic and all the other sessions from teachers far more gifted than I am.

So, it would only be redundant to continue. However, I would like us to turn our attention now to the subject of cultivating our femininity. See, we've stated that God created us feminine.

It is the essence of our nature as women. However, we can also enhance this wonderful gift of femininity that God has given us. In fact, our femininity should grow with the passing of time.

It should actually improve with age. Our femininity should be even more wonderful when we are age-minded. How do we cultivate our femininity? How do we enhance this gracious gift that God has given us? Now, I have labored over how to best answer this question, because there are so many valid and

important points that could be made.

However, I have chosen one section of Scripture that I think best captures a godly pursuit of femininity, and it's found in 1 Peter 3, beginning in verse 3. Peter's exhorting the women, Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past, who put their hope in God, used to make themselves beautiful.

Now, to summarize this, we could say our femininity is cultivated by the pursuit of inner beauty. Pursuing the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit is what enhances our femininity as women. Therefore, I would like to spend the remaining time discussing the subject of beauty.

We're going to first look at the beauty which our culture esteems, physical beauty, and then we're going to consider beauty as God defines it. What is a cultural perspective of beauty? Well, needless to say, physical beauty is very significant for women in today's society. However, I don't think it has only been important to women in our culture.

I mean, isn't it interesting to note in the passage that we just read that Peter needed to address the topic of beauty for the women in his day, way back when? I think it's accurate to say that women have always been concerned about their physical appearance. Recently, I read a fascinating article that illustrates this very point. It's entitled, The Price of Perfection.

And in this article, the author gives an overview through the centuries of the dangerous and mutilating procedures women have undertaken with their bodies in an attempt to pursue beauty as defined by their cultural standards. Let me just read to you a few of the illustrations. In China, almost up until World War II, upper class girls had their feet bound, crippling them for life, but ensuring the three or four inch long feet that were prized as exquisitely feminine.

In Central Africa, the Mangbetu wrapped the heads of female infants in pieces of giraffe hide to attain the elongated, comb-shaped heads that were taken to be a sign of beauty and intelligence. During the Renaissance, well-born European women plucked out hair, one by one, from their natural hairlines all the way back to the crowns of their heads to give themselves the high, rounded foreheads thought beautiful at the time. The author goes on to communicate some of the highs and lows of fashion regarding a woman's breasts.

He said, In ancient Greece, and again in 14th century Europe, breasts were hidden and tightly bound. The ideal torso was a flat torso, an ideal that reemerged for the flappers of the 1920s and the mod models like Twiggy of the 1960s. When stylish women put their breasts under cover in the 1920s, they used constricting devices like the one from the boyish form brassiere company of New York, guaranteed to give you, quote, that boy-like flat appearance.

Some women actually folded their breasts, squashing them as close as possible against the rib cage and holding them there with elastic bindings. Then the pendulum sprung once again. By the 1950s, breasts were back.

And this time, 20th century technological know-how was able to provide far more sophisticated solutions for those who didn't measure up. At first, the only women who surgically enlarged their breasts were

professional entertainers. Carol Dada, a topless cocktail waitress from San Francisco, was one of the pioneers.

In the late 1950s, she became an instant celebrity when she boosted her bosom to a size 44DD with 20 shots of liquid silicone. The author said, Despite the vagaries of vanity which changed the notion of ideal breast size every few decades, one factor has held relatively constant. Most cultures through the centuries have wanted their women to be slim.

In England in 1665, a health pamphlet titled, To Reduce the Body that is Too Fat to a Mean and Handsome Proportion, noted that one handy technique for losing weight was bloodletting. Overweight women, according to this pamphlet, should be bled largely twice a year, the right arm in the spring, the left in the autumn. In the 1930s, desperate women actually swallowed tapeworms to lose weight.

The opera diva Maria Callas is said to have been one such reducer. The article also highlighted measures women have taken to erase facial imperfections. Listen to this.

In the Elizabethan age, many women, in search of skin that looked like porcelain, whitened their faces using ceruse, a potentially lethal combination of vinegar and lead. Queen Elizabeth I used ceruse so consistently that it eventually ate pits into her skin, causing her to pile the paint on in thicker and thicker layers in hopes of camouflaging the growing damage. This, in turn, only led to more corrosion, and the virgin queen's face was ultimately so ravaged that she ordered all mirrors banned from the palace.

It is reported that Elizabeth's servants exploited the ban on mirrors in a wickedly mischievous way. Every morning, they painted the queen's face white with ceruse, but they painted her nose a cruel crimson. Now, this article contains many more illustrations that describe the dangerous and drastic measures women have taken in their quest for beauty, which I will not take any more time to read.

However, we see from the few that I have read, the temptation for women to be preoccupied with their physical appearance has always existed. Women have always been susceptible to becoming absorbed with the pursuit of the physical ideal as defined by the time and culture in which they live. However, in our present-day culture, I think it's accurate to say that women are driven in their pursuit of physical beauty more than ever before.

See, given the impact of modern-day technology and the blitz of media influence, we are bombarded continuously with voices and images that define what we are to look like. Whereas a hundred years ago, women might have compared themselves with the other ten women in their village, today, women compare themselves with pictures of the supermodels put on display by the worldwide fashion industry. And what ideal image has the worldwide fashion industry put forth as the standard of beauty by which every woman is to measure herself? Well, for starters, we must have bodies that are perfect and without defect.

Well, that eliminates the majority of us right at the outset. If we have an unwanted scar or an undesired birthmark, if we have a skin disease or walk with a limp, if we have varicose veins or stretch marks from having babies, if our nose is too big or our hair is too thin or our ears are too pointed, these features and many more are considered defects defined by our society. I personally have half of the defects on the list I just mentioned to you, so obviously I'm disqualified.

Usefulness is also a beauty standard that our culture promotes. We are bombarded with the message, to be beautiful, you must be young. The selling of youth is inflicted on us everywhere we turn.

If we are over the age of 35 or 40, most likely the look of youthfulness has passed us by. And for those of you who are still youthful by our society's standard, can I remind you of something this afternoon? It's going to be short-lived. Someday, every one of us in this room who live long enough, we will resemble our grandma or our great-grandma.

It is the destiny of us all. Having the perfect figure is another mandatory requisite to be beautiful by society's standards. We must have the perfect height.

We must have a large bust, a skinny waist, shapely legs, all neatly packaged in a thin body in order to be beautiful. Again, most of us do not measure up in this category either. And then finally, we must have that cover girl face in order to be beautiful.

We must have a face that looks like the ones we see splashed across all the covers of the magazines on display. We must look like whoever is this season's glamorous model. It is a standard that is not reachable for the majority of us.

So there we have it, ladies. In order to be beautiful in our society, we must have no defects. We must remain forever young.

We must maintain a perfect figure and possess a cover girl face. Anybody here measure up? The fashion industry of our society puts forth an image of beauty so narrow in its range that most women feel unattractive in comparison. And what is even worse is the deception in this industry.

Did you know that most of the models we see in the magazines do not even look like their pictures? Fashion magazine editors have finally admitted that almost every photograph of a model that we see in a magazine has been altered by computer graphics. So think about it. The next time you look at the picture of a model in a magazine, this woman has had her hair done by a professional hairstylist.

She has had her face painted by a professional makeup artist. She has had her picture taken by a professional photographer who knows how to work perfectly with lighting to get the best possible picture, not to mention how many hours she has probably spent working out with her personal trainer every day. And after all of this, if the model still doesn't look good enough, they just rely on computer graphics to create a perfectly beautiful woman.

It is ludicrous. It is preposterous, the standard that our society puts forth as the measurement for beauty. And yet, how have the women in our society responded to this ideal female image? Well, just like in past centuries and in other cultures, women in our century have gone after it with a fury.

Be it breast implants, tummy tucks, liposuction, facelifts, cosmetic surgery, excessive dieting, compulsive exercising, anorexia, bulimia. These are just some of the ways that women have abused their bodies and harmed their bodies in a desperate attempt to make themselves beautiful. This begs the question, why? Why are women so obsessed with physical beauty? Why would women go to such extremes to try to make themselves beautiful? The answer is actually very simple.

It's the evil desires and sinful lusts resident in the human heart. See, the message that accompanies this perfect female image that our society puts forth is, if you are beautiful, you will be happy and successful.

You will be popular among the women.

You will be desirable to the men. You will know lasting intimacy and true love. You will be confident and secure.

You will be important and significant. Now these are all the things that our evil heart craves. The sinful heart lusts for success, significance, recognition, importance, approval.

Therefore, women become obsessed with making themselves physically beautiful in an attempt to satisfy these sinful cravings. And yet, the message is a lie. Physical beauty doesn't ensure happiness, fulfillment, and success.

We can validate this fact by just observing some of the most physically beautiful women in the world. I mean, consider the sad life of Princess Diana. She was physically beautiful.

She was the most photographed woman in the world. She became a celebrity of unprecedented magnitude. Yet, she lived a very unhappy life.

Her fairytale marriage to Prince Charles ended in divorce. Her subsequent relationships with other men all ended unhappily. She admitted to persistent bouts of depression, recurrent loneliness, ongoing bulimia, and even several suicide attempts.

She went through a number of psychotherapists seeking help, all to no avail. And then her life ended with her tragic death at only 36 years old. Physical beauty does not deliver as advertised.

Physical beauty does not produce the happiness and success that the beguiling voices in our society have promised. Our culture puts forth a false standard of beauty. Our culture puts forth a false message about beauty.

And it is the wickedness already resident in the human heart that motivates a person to pursue such a standard and believe such a lie. And this is so important for us to understand as Christian women. Because we all live in this society.

And given our own sinful heart, we are all potentially influenced by our society. And we are challenged in Romans 12 too to not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold. See, the reason for that warning is because of the tendency for that to happen to all of us.

Therefore, the appropriate and necessary question we need to ask ourselves is, Has my heart been captivated by our culture's definition of beauty or God's definition? Does the way I think about and attend to my personal appearance reflect a cultural standard or a biblical standard? In order to answer these questions honestly, we need to understand God's perspective of beauty. To be able to accurately examine our hearts and assess our behavior in this area, we need to have a biblical perspective of beauty. And what does God's word say about beauty? Well, for starters, Proverbs 31.30 reveals the falsehood and the futility of this whole quest for physical beauty.

This verse reveals the end result of such a pursuit. It says, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain. Now, it's interesting, the word charm in the Hebrew means bodily form.

Now, form and beauty are the two things that our culture esteems and pursues with fervor, is it not? And yet God's word exposes our pursuit of the perfect figure and the beautiful look to be worthless. It's

interesting, if you should ever do a study of women in the Bible who were physically beautiful, you will discover that their beauty was far more often connected to trouble and temptation than it was to blessing and goodness. You will find many stories in the Old Testament of lying, cheating, stealing, murder, adultery, and idol worship all linked to the physical beauty of women.

Nowhere in the Bible are women instructed to wish for, ask for, or strive for physical beauty. Instead, it warns us of the futility and deceitfulness of such a pursuit. Neither does the Bible portray physical beauty as a blessing for those who have it.

It alerts us instead to the greater potential for snares and temptation that come with having this trait. However, coming back again to our 1 Peter passage, we discover that there is a beauty that we are to pursue. There is a beauty that will enhance our femininity.

Let's look at these verses one more time to examine them more closely. Starting again in verse 3. First we read what true beauty isn't. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.

And now we discover the beauty we are to pursue. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which is of great worth in God's sight. And then in verse 5 we're given role models.

For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. We see from this passage that God's definition of beauty stands in stark contrast to how our culture defines beauty. Our culture defines beauty by how we look on the outside.

God defines beauty by how we look on the inside. Our culture puts forth a standard of beauty that is unattainable by most. God puts forth a standard of beauty to which we can all attain if we but surrender to his work of grace in our lives.

Our culture encourages women to cultivate a beauty that is fleeting. Elizabeth Taylor will never again look like she did when she was 16 years old and starring in National Velvet even in spite of all the cosmetic alterations she has undergone. She'll never look that beautiful again.

Our culture encourages women to cultivate a beauty that would only last for a brief amount of time. God encourages women to cultivate a beauty that will never fade and it will only grow more attractive with the passing of time. See, our culture seeks to entice us to cultivate a beauty that is for the eyes of all to behold and to impress everyone.

God summons us to cultivate a beauty for his eyes only. A beauty that is of great worth in his sight. Our culture solicits us to aspire to the beauty of the latest glamorous model or this season's most popular actress.

God bids us to aspire to the beauty of the holy women of the past who put their hope in God. The beauty our culture esteems, it may turn some heads. But the beauty God calls us to cultivate, it will make a lasting impact.

I mean, think about it. When someone physically attractive walks by, we notice. Men in particular notice.

But that's the end of it. It makes a brief, momentary impression. But a woman who cultivates inner beauty, who fears God and lives to serve others, makes a difference in people's lives.

Her beauty makes a lasting impact on the lives of those she touches. Think about the ones who have affected your life. You'll never forget them.

They don't make a brief impact. They make a lasting impact on your life. Physical beauty may turn some heads.

But inner beauty leaves an indelible mark on the lives of others. Our culture's pursuit of beauty can be summarized with this definition. A love of self.

God's definition of beauty can be summarized with this definition. A love for God. Which beauty are we seeking to cultivate? Are we intentionally and actively cultivating an inner beauty? Or do we give more attention to our outward appearance? See, the way we think about and attend to our personal appearance is really a mirror on our hearts.

It shows whether our priority is to cultivate inner beauty or outer beauty. It actually reveals either a love for God or a love for self. It either reflects godly motivations or selfish motivations.

I have provided on your outline a little heart check test for the purpose of self-examination. These are ten questions to help us discern our thoughts and motives and goals regarding the issue of beauty in our lives. And I would encourage you to go through these questions on your own time.

Hopefully they will be useful for you to help you determine what is in my heart regarding this issue. I know for me, questions such as these have helped me to see the pervasive selfishness that can be in my heart. It's questions like these that have helped me to see that all too often my desire is for self-glory rather than desiring God's glory.

Yet, 1 Corinthians 10:31 calls me to an altogether different standard. It says, whether then you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Everything we should do, everything we do should be for God's glory, not our own.

We are to pursue holiness in every aspect of our lives, including our beauty pursuit. How is this possible? How can we possibly please God in our pursuit of beauty? How can we cultivate a beauty that reflects a love for God rather than a love for self? How can we put to death those evil desires in our heart that result in craving attention from others, that lead us to comparing ourselves with others, evil desires which tempt us to be absorbed with ourselves, evil desires which tempt us to be preoccupied with our personal appearance? How can we deal with these evil desires in our hearts? How can we cultivate biblical thoughts? Biblical motives and biblical actions in our quest for beauty? Well, I believe it begins by setting our hearts and minds on things above. Let's read Colossians 3, verses 1 through 5. It's printed on your outline.

And as we read this section of scripture, I want you to note a natural progression in these verses. Pay close attention. Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things, for you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death,

therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.

Did you catch the progression? See, before we are told to put to death our evil desires, we are told to set our hearts and minds on things above. This is such an important point. The key to putting to death our evil desires, the starting point for any repentance, is setting our hearts and minds on things above.

So what does that mean? What does it mean to set my heart and mind on things above? It means to direct our attention towards Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross. To set our hearts and minds on things above means to aggressively focus on Jesus Christ and continually remind ourselves that because of his death on the cross, we are forgiven of every evil desire, we are justified from every evil desire, and we are no longer enslaved by any evil desire. Jesus died to redeem us from both the penalty and the power of sin in our lives.

May we revel in his grace. May we marvel at his mercy in our lives. See, to set our hearts and minds on things above means to be taken up with the beauty of his amazing grace and his undeserved mercy in our lives.

And do you know what? As we devote our attention to his beauty, we will only grow more beautiful. In fact, the more we seek to know him, the more beautiful we will become. Robert Murray McShane says, Take ten looks at Christ for every look at ourselves.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see the beauty of the Lord. Beholding his beauty is what makes us beautiful. Now let's consider some practical changes in our thinking and our behavior that we may need to make in order to develop biblical beauty goals.

What objectives must we incorporate into our lives so that we will be pursuing a beauty that enhances our femininity as women? Well, first, we need to resolve whom it is I am to please in my beauty pursuit. Single women, you have only one to please. 1 Corinthians 7.35 points an unmarried woman to the Lord as the object of her beauty pursuit.

All your thoughts, motives, and actions related to beauty should be for the eyes of one and one only, God alone. Married women, we have two to please, God and our husband. Now that may sound like heresy that I should say we are to please someone besides God in our beauty pursuit.

But let me explain. See, God calls us in Scripture to please our husband. So therefore, we are pleasing God when we seek to please our husband.

We need to find out our husband's preferences with regards to how we care for our appearance. How does he want me to dress, style my hair, wear or not wear makeup? And as a way to honor and serve and please our husband, we need to take care of our physical appearance. Now I must interject here that seeking to please the Lord in our beauty pursuit will not result in trying to look ugly or appear unattractive.

I am not advocating for a moment that we neglect our personal appearance. Pure devotion to God will produce a woman who has an appropriate concern about her physical appearance. She will want to present an outward appearance that honors God and attracts others to her life in a right way.

She will want to care for her outward appearance in a way that heightens her chance to share testimony about the Christ who dwells within her. Looking like a slob does not reflect the beauty of our Creator.

Neither does it increase our effectiveness in sharing the gospel.

It is not wrong to seek to enhance our own appearance. It is not evil to wear stylish clothing and an attractive hairstyle. It is not sinful to wear makeup and jewelry.

We see in scripture where the Proverbs 31 woman wore colorful, high-quality clothing. The bride in Song of Solomon adorned her appearance with jewelry. We are told that Esther underwent 12 months of beauty treatment, 6 months with oil and myrrh and 6 with perfumes and cosmetics.

The Bible does not condemn the wearing of these things. It is wearing them for the wrong motives that God's Word forbids. However, when the Lord is the object of our beauty pursuit, we will have a proper concern about our physical appearance.

As John Piper said in his book, *A Godward Life*, With God at the center, like the sun satisfying a woman's longing for beauty and greatness and truth and love, all the planets of food and dress and exercise and cosmetics and posture and countenance will stay in their proper orbit. Another beauty objective we need to cultivate is we need to acknowledge God's providence and receive with gratefulness the body and appearance that God has given to each of us. God determined what we would look like.

We were not presented with an array of options. We were not given a choice. He decided our body shape, how tall we would be, the color of our eyes and all the unique features that make up our body type and appearance.

God determined that. Now we can either spend our lives pining about the result of God's determination, or we can receive with gratefulness His design, knowing that He does all things for His glory and our good. I love the story that Elizabeth Elliott tells about Gladys Allward in her book, *Let Me Be a Woman*.

She says, You have heard me tell of Gladys Allward, the small woman of China, whom I heard speak many years ago at Prairie Bible Institute in Alberta. She told how when she was a child, she had two great sorrows. One, that while all her friends had beautiful golden hair, hers was black.

The other, that while her friends were still growing, she stopped. She was about four feet, ten inches tall. But when at last she reached the country to which God had called her to be a missionary, she stood on the wharf in Shanghai and looked around at the people to whom He had called her.

Every single one of them, she said, had black hair. And every single one of them had stopped growing when I did. And I said, Lord God, you know what you are doing.

Are we able to say the same about our own appearance? Lord God, you know what you are doing and you do all things well. David said, I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. When was the last time you worshipped God for the way He created your body? You don't have to answer that.

Anything less than a heart filled with gratitude and praise to God for our physical appearance, it's sinful and it grieves the Lord. It shouldn't be so. Another essential beauty objective, we need to recognize our body is not our own.

1 Corinthians 6 says, Do you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.

Are we treating our body as if it is not our own? Are we caring for our body as if it belongs to another? Do we take special extra care because this body doesn't belong to us? Don't we usually take extra special care of something that doesn't belong to us, that belongs to another? I remember on one occasion after a special event at our church, a very kind woman came to me and gave me the centerpiece from her table. It was a beautiful flower arrangement that she had created. It was displayed in this china teapot.

She graciously told me to enjoy the flowers and that I could return the teapot to her at my convenience. I did enjoy that flower arrangement, but you can be sure I took special care of that china teapot as well. I made sure to keep it out of the reach of my little boy, who was three at the time.

I exhorted all of my daughters to be very careful with this because it belongs to so-and-so. Now why? Why was I being so careful with this china teapot? Because it wasn't mine. It belonged to someone else.

I wanted to be able to return the teapot to her undamaged in the same way. Our bodies are not our own. They belong to God.

Therefore, we should be careful how we treat our bodies. We should treat them with special care. We should not neglect them.

We should do nothing to abuse them. We are not to overlook and ignore what the Bible has to say regarding how we are to view and care for this body. We are not the owner of this body.

God is. It is the temple for the Holy Spirit. We house the Holy Spirit in our very own body.

That makes all the difference how we should treat it. And finally, we need to replace the vanity in our lives with the pursuit of godliness. Try as hard as we may, we are not going to find any verse in the Bible that encourages pursuing a body that is perfectly thin, always tanned, and completely toned.

It is not a godly pursuit. Now, let's consider this pursuit for just a moment. Is it not self-glory rather than God's glory we are pursuing when it is our goal to be thin, tanned, and toned? Doesn't the pursuit of a perfect figure lead to a preoccupation with self rather than a preoccupation with God? Listen to this woman's confession.

I'm feeling fat and can't keep my mind off my weight. All day long I think about food, avoiding food, eating certain kinds of food, cooking diet dinners, feeling ashamed if I overeat, feeling great if I don't. Food has become my daily focus even though I'm trying to lose weight with God's help and first glory.

I exercise, shop correctly, and snack on baby carrots. Every time we go out to eat, I ask the waitress or counterperson about the number of calories and fat grams, complaining about diet coke tasting like chemicals. While getting dressed in front of my husband, I point out my burgeoning waistline and inquire about his opinion of my wide behind.

I talk constantly about this struggle. Doesn't this woman's confession reveal a preoccupation with self rather than a preoccupation with God? The pursuit of a good figure is vanity. We are seeking our own glory rather than God's glory.

God's Word condemns such a pursuit. We are not to be conformed into the image our culture worships. We are to be conformed into the image of God.

We need to replace the vanity in our lives with the pursuit of godliness. Therefore, our eating and exercise habits should reflect goals such as these. I am developing the fruit of the spirit of self-control in my life.

I want to treat my body as not my own. I want to strengthen my body for effective service to the Lord. Those should be the kinds of goals we have.

When is the last time you heard a woman say that she needs to be more disciplined in exercise for the purpose of strengthening her body for the Lord's service? Do not women normally lament their lack of discipline in this area because of the negative effects it has on how they look rather than the negative effects it has on their body's health and strength? Are they usually not more concerned about thighs that are too big and a stomach that's no longer flat than they are concerned about the health and strength of their body? When is the last time you heard a woman grieve over the fact that she has dishonored God by overeating? Isn't her sadness about her sinful eating habits usually because of the negative consequences it has on her appearance rather than a godly sorrow for disobeying God? Are we pursuing vanity or are we pursuing godliness in our eating and exercise habits? Are we seeking our own glory or are we seeking God's glory in the way we care for our body? We need to realize God is not going to bless our vain pursuits. He's not going to honor self-glorification. He's only going to bless the pursuit of godliness in our lives.

We need to settle that once and for all. How about the area of our dress? Are we seeking the approval of others or are we seeking to impress? Or worse yet, are we seeking to allure men by the way we dress and care for our appearance? Again, these are vain pursuits and the Bible strongly forbids such attitudes and behavior. The Bible provides very specific and clear instructions on how we are to dress and care for our appearance.

1 Timothy 2 lays out the guidelines for it. 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. I'm sure everyone in this room make a claim to godliness.

Then it's very clear from these verses how we are to dress and care for our appearance. It is characterized by three distinctives. It is to be proper, modest, and discreet.

Does my clothing, my jewelry, my hairstyle, and my makeup that I use stay within the boundaries of these three definitions? Is it proper? Is it modest? Is it discreet? I want us to consider the word modest for a moment. Some time back I did a word study on this word in 1 Timothy and discovered from the commentaries that it has a very interesting meaning in the Greek. It means shamefacedness or shamefastness.

The root idea is a sense of shame. It raises the question of what are we to be ashamed? It refers to a sense of shame in the sense of we should be ashamed if we ever contribute to a man being tempted to lustful thinking by our dress. We should be ashamed if we ever cause a man to stumble by our clothing.

Do we carry a proper sense of shame in the way we dress? I don't think any of us are ignorant that the more of our body is exposed the more of a temptation this provides for men. Therefore, we should carry a sense of shame to ever cause such a distraction. We need to make an effort to serve men and not to be a source of temptation by the way we dress.

If we are wondering if we are dressed properly, modestly, and discreetly we simply need to check our heart. We need to do a motive check. We should ask ourselves, why am I dressed this way? What is my intent? What is my goal? Am I trying to draw attention to God or to myself? Am I seeking to glorify God or to impress others? John MacArthur said, You show me a woman with a beautiful character.

You show me a woman with a meek and quiet spirit. You show me a woman with an incorruptible heart. You show me a woman who comes to worship God.

And I will show you a woman whose wardrobe you don't have to worry about. May the Lord help us to be that kind of a woman. I want to close this afternoon by reading a little story that John Piper included in his book, Future Grace.

And it's about a woman who abandoned the physical beauty quest in pursuit of true beauty. Evelyn Harris Brand, the mother of Paul Brand, the world-renowned hand surgeon and leprosy specialist, grew up in a well-to-do English family. She had studied at the London Conservatory of Art and dressed in the finest silks.

But she went with her husband to minister as missionaries in the Kalimalai Range of India. After about 10 years, her husband died at age 44, and she came home a broken woman, beaten down by pain and grief. But after a year's recuperation and against all advice, she returned to India.

Her soul was restored, and she poured her life into the hill people, nursing the sick, teaching farming, lecturing about guinea worms, rearing orphans, clearing jungle land, pulling teeth, establishing schools, preaching the gospel. She lived in a portable hut, 8 feet square, that could be taken down, moved, and erected again. At age 67, she fell and broke her hip.

Her son Paul had just come to India as a surgeon. He encouraged her to retire. She had already suffered a broken arm, several cracked vertebrae, and recurrent malaria.

Paul mounted as many arguments as he could think of to persuade her that 67 years was a good investment in ministry, and now it was time to retire. Her response? Paul, you know these mountains. If I leave, who will help the village people? Who will treat their wounds and pull their teeth and teach them about Jesus? When someone comes to take my place, then and only then will I retire.

In any case, why preserve this old body if it's not going to be used where God needs me? That was her final answer, so she worked on. At the age of 95, she died. Following her instructions, villagers buried her in a simple cotton sheet so that her body would return to the soil and nourish new life.

Her spirit, too, lived on in a church, a clinic, several schools, and in the faces of thousands of villagers across five mountain ranges of South India. Her son commented that with wrinkles as deep and extensive as any I have ever seen on a human face, she was a beautiful woman. But it was not the beauty of the silk and heirlooms of London high society.

For the last 20 years of her life, she refused to have a mirror in her house. She was consumed with ministry, not mirrors. What are we consumed with? Ministry or mirrors? Which beauty are we seeking to cultivate? The beauty that is of great worth to God or the beauty that our culture worships? Like Evelyn Harris Brand, if we pursue true beauty, our femininity will only grow more beautiful.

Like Evelyn Harris Brand, if we seek to please God in our quest for beauty, our femininity will even be more beautiful at age 95 than it is now. Let's ask our Lord to help us cultivate such a beauty. Father, we do ask that you would help us to set our hearts and minds on things above, to be women who gaze upon your beauty, to be women who develop and cultivate an inner beauty.

Father, help us to not be consumed by the beauty that our culture worships. Lord, that we would be women who pursue true beauty, that we would receive with gratefulness the bodies that you have given us, that we would take extra special care of this body, that we would not pursue vain for sins, Lord, but our quest for beauty would be one that honors you and brings glory to your name. Father, we just ask that you would help us as women to do that.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. This concludes the message.

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