



BEAUTIFUL WOMEN

Additional Note # 1 for *Scattered Bible Study #8* (1 Peter 3:1-7)

In 1 Peter 3:3-6 Peter gives significant attention to what makes women in general and wives in particular truly beautiful. Although he doesn't index his comments to a woman's beauty, Paul really makes the same point in 1 Timothy 2:9,10. This has significance for married and unmarried women, and for men!

Peter addresses the issue of wives' beauty in three stages. Firstly, in verse 3, he identifies a wrong way of attempting to display beauty: "Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewellery, or the clothing you wear." Secondly, in verse 4, he identifies the beauty with which a godly woman will adorn herself: "let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious." Thirdly, in verses 5 & 6, he gives as examples, faithful Old Testament women, and in particular, Sarah: "For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening."

In 1 Timothy 2, Paul addresses the conduct of women in general, not just wives. In verse 9 he identifies ungodly conduct in almost the same words used by Peter in identifying ungodly ugliness (albeit in the name of "beauty"), saying that women should not adorn themselves "with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes." Although he doesn't give the examples Peter refers to, he leaves us in little doubt that he has exactly the same concept of godliness, beginning in verse 9 by saying "I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety," and continuing in verse 10 by admonishing women to adorn themselves, "with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God."

It is clear that, under the inspiration of God, both Apostles saw a problem for Christian women of their day in the way they presented themselves. One would have to be blind to not realise it is an issue in practically every age and culture. Certainly it is an issue for many women in contemporary society, and for many Christian women today.

What do you regard as beautiful? How do you nurture the valuation of godly beauty in yourself (or your wife) and others? How do you encourage boys and girls to value the inner beauty of godliness above bodily appearance and superficial adornment?

It is clear that God has made women with a physical beauty and that he intends husbands to recognise and value such beauty in their wives (Genesis 24 and Solomon [the whole book]). Yet all too often the physical beauty of women is cited by the Bible as an occasion for sin (see Genesis 6:2 etc). Proverbs 31:30 warns that "beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." So one might be tempted to think women should not nurture beauty and that wives should not be beautiful in the eyes of their husbands. But neither Apostle is asserting anything of the sort. They are not telling women to be unattractive, but to be attractive in godliness.

Peter contrasts the outward show of stuff with inner godliness. Notice too that he is not giving a list of prohibited and/or permitted adornment: he gives examples of the two contrasting groups. There is elaborate and expensive stuff, possibly even beautiful, that covers a person but does not make them beautiful because a beautiful covering (much less an empty, ostentatious one) doesn't change what it covers. It is easily displayed but doesn't last. He gives the examples of fancy hair styles, valuable jewellery, and up-market clothing. These things make a woman stand out in the crowd.

In contrast, there is godly character, the hidden quality of the heart, is an unfading beauty that is within a person (covered by the person, if you like, rather than covering the person). It is not obvious, and such a woman does not stand out in a crowd, although a gentle and quiet spirit *will be seen* by those close to such a woman. And as Paul points out in 1 Timothy 2:10, it is *evidenced* by good works a woman does, not by what she wears. The examples given are submission, obedience, modesty, decency and propriety.

Godless women dress up, decorate up, and style their hair up *to be seen*. With nothing of true, spiritual beauty to be seen, they make themselves empty mannequins upon which passing wealth and fading flesh can be advertised. Such an inwardly ugly woman is not made beautiful by what she covers herself in; rather, she advertises her worldliness. An inwardly beautiful woman is not made ugly by covering that lacks such extravagance. Inwardly beautiful women dress and adorn themselves so they are not seen but so that Christ is seen. Their adornment of godliness advertises Jesus.

It is interesting to note that the three good works that Paul lists – modesty, decency and propriety – are really just aspects of the same thing, and that they have a cultural point of reference. Some things that are modest, decent and propitious in one culture could well be offensive or eccentric in another. A bathing costume, for instance, that might be commonly regarded as modest here in New Zealand would most certainly be regarded as immodest in other cultures; and what they regard as modest could be so eccentric here, immodestly making the wearer stand out. Yet a swim suit that is regarded as modest on the beach is unlikely to be regarded as modest in the shopping centre, office or church, while wearing a business suit and high heels on the beach would often be immodest in a different sense, in that the wearer draws eccentric attention to herself. There is, of course, a base-line to modesty and purity: public displays of genitals, for example, is always impure and immodest. But so is wearing something that is not fitting to the context.

However, it is easy to misread these passages as if the Apostles are instructing wives in particular and women in general to dress unattractively, to dress down, to have unkempt hair and androgynous clothing that gives no expression to their femininity. Modesty, decency and propriety can in fact be nice and can fittingly complement a quiet and gentle spirit. In fact, modest, decent and propitious clothing and adornment *is fitting* for a godly woman. Interestingly, Peter doesn't actually prohibit outward adornment; he says that is not to be the locus of what a wife considers is her beauty. Yet he does make clear, just as Paul makes clear, that no believing woman should dress or adorn herself immodestly, unpropitiously, or and indecently. What they *are* doing is drawing a contrast between outward display (and ostentatious outward display at that) and the true godly beauty of inner faithfulness and character. On the one hand, there is elaborate dress and adornment that draws attention to what a woman has and stuff she values. In contrast, a godly woman does not show-off her worldliness through outward display, but reveals her godliness through how she lives.

So what will a godly woman of beauty wear? How will faithful women of beauty adorn themselves? We get a very big clue by the context: both Apostles raise women's dress and adornment in the context of submission. For Peter, the issue is the necessity of wives submitting to their husbands; and for Paul the issue is women's submission to the elders in gathered worship (not in submission to all men, that is, but to the elders – those men to whom God has entrusted the authority in the church). Of course, so far as submission in the church goes, men also must submit to the elders; but that is not the issue Paul is dealing with – here he is concerned about how women show off.

What this means is that women will dress and adorn themselves in ways that acknowledge that they are not autonomous, and that they do not serve themselves. All believing women (and for that matter, all believing men) serve Christ first, and whatever beauty is theirs and is displayed, ought to draw attention to Christ. No believing person serves themselves: we are all called to serve Christ. Further, every believer is called to serve others, which necessarily not only involves not seeking their own good or glory, but submitting their preferences and desires (even those that might otherwise be legitimate) to the good of others and to the will of those who have authority.

But that doesn't really give a comprehensive dress-code. It helps with some situations, but not with all. So women are going to have to make choices as to what they wear and how they adorn themselves in ways that, in their culture, in the particular relationship involved (eg marriage, church worship, etc), and in the context of the activities they are engaged in, are fitting and allow their good works to be their hallmark-advertisement for Jesus, while not superimposing on themselves an outward display that advertises worldliness.

There is a danger of responding with legalism (eg since Peter mentions "braided hair," a rule could be made that women should not have braided hair but are permitted to have expensively styled waves!). I heard of a church once that asked visitors (men and women) to remove their gold-rimmed spectacles since the "Bible prohibits adorning with gold." I'm not sure they got the point of this passage! And I shudder to think how they treated visitors who arrived with gold fillings in their teeth. But Peter's point seems to be that the inner beauty should be what stands out rather than a woman's adornment. In other words, there is more of an emphasis on what a woman should be doing to make herself truly beautiful, than on what she should not wear.

Yet such an emphasis cannot annul the clear principle that a woman should not attempt to dress or adorn herself as if what she wears expresses or enhances her beauty. At the very least this passage teaches that any outward display that draws attention to the wearer or to the wearer's possessions is out of place and is likely to overshadow the godliness that should be characteristic of wives in particular and women in general.

ABOUT "SCATTERED"

Scattered is a series of Bible Studies that you can do alone at home, or with others in a group. They don't depend on a leader or someone affirming the right answer. The title of the series comes from Peter's addressing his letter to "*strangers in the world, scattered throughout*" the world. Christians will always be scattered in this world in all sorts of ways. Writing the series started during the Covid-19 lockdowns when we were as isolated as if we had been scattered. But Peter highlights the fact that it is our separation *to Christ* that separates *us from the world*. So he sees Christians as scattered strangers struggling in an alien world, and sets out to encourage us to live faithful and holy lives in Christ. The series is available (free) here: <https://www.michaeldrake.name/scattered>