

1 Timothy 2:9-10

We live in a culture obsessed with a certain view of beauty. It is the view presented on the cover of a thousand magazines every year, It is the view which guides the casting decisions of directors and producers of countless movies and plays. It is the view that is portrayed and obscenely exaggerated by the multi-billion dollar pornography industry. It is the view that is marketed by MTV and VH-1 through un-ending, round-the-clock music videos. It is the view that some men and countless self-loathing women have in their heads as they lean over the toilet and purge themselves of their most recent culinary sins.

In her 1991 book, *The Beauty Myth :How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf writes tellingly and at times quite poignantly on this subject. And, while Ms Wolfs presuppositions are not biblical, and there is much that I would want to challenge her on, at the end of the day, underlying this book is a very real and legitimate questioning of the whole manner in which our society and culture approaches the subject of beauty. Her opening words are certainly provocative,

The affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, do not feel as free as they want to. And they can no longer restrict to the subconscious their sense that this lack of freedom has something to do with apparently frivolous issues, things that really shouldn't matter. Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns - to do with personal appearance, bodies, face, hair, clothes - matter so much. But in spite of shame, guilt and denial, more and more women are wondering if it isn't that they are entirely neurotic and alone but rather that something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest growing medical specialty. During the past five years, consumer spending doubled, pornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal. More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our un-liberated grandmothers. Recent research consistently shows that inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret underlife poisoning our freedom. Infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control.....

The subject of Ms Wolf s book - beauty and adornment - is our subject this morning as we see what Paul's words reveal about how it was viewed in Paul's day, how he responded to that, and what a biblical perspective on these things would entail

for believers in our own day. And, while what we will be saying this morning has significance and points of application for all believers - male and female - I will be speaking more directly to the women this morning, on this particular subject - for a couple reasons:

1) Firstly, because this is what Paul did in his letter, singling out the women for his comments in this area. The words he uses here are addressing "women" and not merely "people". So, since Paul took this approach, I am trying to follow his lead.

2) Secondly, while writers like Naomi Wolf do have a point in trying to show how, to a certain degree, the excessive concern with outward appearances has been artificially foisted upon women in our culture - nevertheless, Wolf's attempt to render women as simply the blameless victims of a kind of "cultural conspiracy" do not rest well with either the biblical view of human nature nor the honest admissions of women themselves who do not share the same worldview as Ms Wolf.

As a result, the sheer statistical weight of evidence - the numbers of female vs male fashion stores in our shopping malls, the numbers of female vs male magazines devoted to matters of personal appearance, the \$33 billion dollar a year, female-dominated diet industry, the \$20 billion dollar a year cosmetic industry, and the \$400 million dollar a year cosmetic surgery industry - cannot simply be explained away as the financial trail of evidence left behind by culturally coerced who are being forced to consider matters of personal appearance against their wills.

Surely somewhere in that mixed bag which describes every human intention, beside the undeniable influence of cultural expectations is a certain amount of personal choice and personal responsibility for actions taken and attitudes assumed with regard to personal appearance.

And so, for those reasons, while I think everything Paul says here is applicable to both men and women, I will be approaching these realities with the assumption that Paul's instincts in specifically addressing the women in the church on this matter were not wrong, and are just as valid today as they were in his own day.

Again, by addressing the men first on one issue - as we did last week - and then the women on another issue, Paul's intention is not to speak in absolutes - as if only men struggle with anger and fighting or only women will struggle in the area of personal appearance. Rather, the issue here is tendencies - which issue would be more of a struggle for men than women? Paul's answer was: anger and fighting. Such things are not particular besetting sins for women. Likewise, which issues would typically be more of a challenge for women than men? Paul's answer was: Issues of personal appearance and adornment. Such issues are not as often likely to become besetting sins for men. And so, with those words of introduction, let's read the text, ask God to teach us, and then dig in ... (read and pray)

In simple terms, Paul says here that Christian women ought to be known by how they live, not by how they dress. If a Christian woman has any reputation at all, any defining characteristic that sticks out in peoples' minds, it ought to be that she is a person that is given to doing good. Now, in order to understand where Paul is coming from a bit better, it is helpful to know a little something about the culture of Paul's day.

If you were to look at sculptures made during that time period or if you were to read literature written at the same time as Paul's letter, you would discover that back then, no less than is the case today, fashion was an important matter. And, if you looked at women's fashions in particular you would find that in and around the area of Ephesus, one of the most popular fashions of the day centered around a woman's HAIR. The well-to-do ladies would create these "hair sculptures" so to speak, piling their hair up into this sort of tower - a lot like the way Marj Simpson's hair looks.

Anyway, after the hair was all piled up they would take gold jewelry and pearls and the like and weave it through their hair as a sign of wealth and status. But it wasn't just the well-to-do ladies that did these things. There is evidence that the temple prostitutes did their hair in similar ways, but with some subtle differences that signaled their different role and status.

Now, when you read Paul's words here over against THAT sort of background you can begin to see some of the implications, right? Just as it is today, so it was back then that when people come to Christ they typically do so with a lot of baggage from both their culture and from the circumstance in which they were living when Christ saved them. And it is the work of a lifetime to learn to apply the practical implications of your faith in all the different areas of your life, including your work, your leisure, your money, your time, your family, your relationships, your values and ideals, etc. This certainly would have been true for the ladies in Paul's day. And it would have been quite natural and understandable that they would, at least initially, carry their surrounding culture's attitudes and actions regarding beauty and personal adornment with them into the church.

As a result Paul's words to the ladies on this subject, coming amidst a 1st century Ephesian context, would have seemed quite COUNTER-CULTURAL. He tells the women in Ephesus that in the area of clothing and personal appearance, they were not to simply continue on in the style and manner of the culture around them. That's the wrong starting place

Rather than simply imitating the extravagance of the rich or the immodesty of the temple prostitutes, the women of Ephesus were to exercise restraint and moderation, to dress with decency and propriety. They were to remember that, unlike those women, they were ones who professed belief in God and who worshiped God and that, therefore, their manner of dress and concerns about personal appearance ought to be a

reflection of that, rather than simply a reflection of the people around them.

But Paul doesn't stop there. He actually goes on in these verses to challenge the traditional ideas about adornment, thinking in entirely different categories with regard to what it is that best adorns a person's life or what makes a person truly beautiful.

In short, Paul says that the beauty with which a woman should be most concerned is not the external kind - not the kind that has to do with being a particular shape or size, or having a certain kind of complexion, or wearing a specific style or brand of clothing, etc.

Rather, the beauty Paul is concerned with is an internal beauty - a beauty that radiates from a certain kind of heart and attitude and works its way out into "good deeds" - as Paul says - that are "appropriate for women who profess to worship God." And, let you think such an idea is unique to Paul, listen to the words of another apostle, Peter, as he writes,

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. 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.

This same perspective - equating adornment/beauty with one's manner of living - that perspective can also be found in Revelation 19:7-8 and, while the language used there is certainly figurative in nature - using the imagery of a marriage ceremony between Christ and his bride, the Church - even using such figurative language, the description of the church's "wedding garments" is very telling:

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear....

And then we are told what this "fine linen" consists of,

Fine linen, says John, stands for the righteous acts of the saints.....

The "clothing" so to speak, of Christ's bride - the Church, his people - is the good deeds and righteous acts that they perform. To be sure, these actions have not merited their relationship with Christ, but they have certainly adorned that life. And so, again, we see in Scripture how, from God's perspective, the thing that best adorns a person's life is their manner of living - who they are and the way they are - not what they wear and how they look. And so, going back to the passage in 1st Timothy we see that Paul is doing two things here. He is instructing the women to use a different standard with

regard to matters of clothing and personal appearance - to dress with modesty and propriety, not with immodesty and impropriety. And then he goes beyond that to show that far more important than how they dress is how they live, i.e., how they adorn themselves with good deeds.

Well, it's all fine and good thinking about what Paul was saying to the women in Ephesus, but the question that some of you may be asking is: What is the significance of these words for me? And that is a fair question to ask because when we interpret the Bible we always have to remember that while it certainly IS written to us and for us it, nevertheless, always comes to us through the medium of history and culture.

To be sure, God's truth is timeless and authoritative. But that truth, in God's providence, was first delivered to people in particular circumstances and times and so, while the CONTENT of God's truth remains the same - i.e., the meaning never changes - nevertheless, the significance and implications of that meaning are not always the same for us, as they were for the original hearers.

So the question for God's people in every age is not IF any portion of God's word applies to them - it always does - that's a given. The only question is how the Bible applies. And in making THAT determination of how the Bible applies, we take our cues from the Bible itself.

And so, seeking to do just that with this passage, it is important to note how Paul argues his point here. He talks about women dressing modestly and about them adorning themselves with good deeds and then he says that this sort of behavior is appropriate for women who profess to worship God. That is, Paul does not argue that they should do this because their particular cultural situation demands it - his reasons have nothing to do with culture. On the contrary, his reasons are all based upon who these women are, who they have professed to be - people who worship the true and living God. And so, Paul gives what amounts to a trans-cultural reason for what he says and, as a result, these things are equally applicable to women in every age who profess to worship God.

And so, the principle that a Christian woman (and Christian men, of course, but we're sticking with Paul's emphasis on the ladies here) - the principle that Christian women ought to be known by how they live not by how they dress - that principle is as important today as it was back then. But that still leaves another issue. What about the braided hair? What about the gold and pearls and expensive clothes? Are women to avoid these things today? Is there something intrinsically wrong with these items and practices that renders them out of bounds for Christian women?

Now, as one commentator points out, before you answer that question it is helpful at this stage to stop and do a bit of a heart check. The thing you have to ask yourself - and keep asking yourself - is: "What do I intend to do with what the Bible says?" Are you really prepared to do what the Bible says, to live according to its

principles? You need to ask yourself that question. Because if you're not prepared to do what the Bible says, then you may as well throw it out. If you're only going to respond to the things that sit well with you and ignore the rest then you might as well write the Bible yourself. What do you intend to do with what the Bible says?

You see, understanding the Bible is inseparably connected to obeying the Bible. People who are not prepared to do what the Bible says will not understand it. Yes, they'll hear it in a physical, phenomenological sense, but they won't really hear it. They won't understand it. And that's because Bible truth is something that can only be understood from the inside. It's a lot like the stained glass you see in these great cathedrals. On the outside looking in it appears dark and forbidding, hard to imagine or work out. From the inside the same glass is brilliant, luminous and beautiful as all the pieces come together and make sense. That's what God's truth is like. You've got to be willing to obey it, to be on the inside, if you want to really understand it.

Now, having said that, let me take some of the pressure off and say that it seems to me that Paul's concern here is not with braided hair, gold, pearls and expensive clothes themselves but rather with what these things represented in the culture of his day. As one commentator writes, "Paul is forbidding a style of dress and hair that was known to his readers and that was particularly reprehensible because of both its immodesty and its cost in time, money and effort. This understanding is supported by the fact that in both the Old and New Testaments there are situations where things like gold, jewels and even elaborate clothing have an appropriate place and use - e.g., as part of the structure and ceremony surrounding the Temple. And so, it is not with these things AS SUCH that Paul has a problem, but only with these things as they were used by the immodest and wealthy citizens of Ephesus. The particular styles he mentions here were ones which would have either been sexually suggestive and/or items of adornment that would have cost more than most people made in a week or a month - or more.

But identifying these things, while helpful, is not enough. There is more going on here than simply providing a set of instructions about women's fashion. We need to ask the question: Why was this instruction given? What are some of the bigger issues that lie behind these words? Even further, we need to ask: "What are other biblical truths that have a bearing on this issue?"

Well, for starters, there's the issue of consistency. Paul makes it clear in his other writings that there is and ought to be a consistency between what we believe and profess and how we live. He is telling them to bring their manner of living in line with their profession of faith. You don't worship God in a vacuum, right? Worship flows from life, indeed, it is a way of living - which is Paul's point in Romans 12:1-2. And your life either adorns that worship or it does not. Paul wants his readers to be consistent.

A second matter that has a bearing here has to do with the principle of Christian moderation. Balance. Self-control. A life not given to extremes. Living in an age like

ours, an age of excess, makes it difficult to appreciate the Bible's teaching in this area. Nevertheless, it IS taught in the Bible by Paul and is one thing, among others, that lies back of Paul's teaching that women should "dress modestly, with decency and propriety". Words like that speak of selfcontrol, which is a fruit of God's Spirit, working within the human heart.

A third matter that has a bearing here has to do with the concern for others that is to be manifest amongst us, especially when we are gathered together. The word "propriety" here suggests this sort of perspective. It is a word that speaks of being outward looking, of being away of how one's actions are received by others and how they might affect and influence others. With regard to women's dress and appearance it would involve a consideration of how one's decisions in this area affect those around you, and in particular the men around you. Paul encourages women to dress "modestly" and "with decency" for good reason. Because to dress immodestly or provocatively is unhelpful to your brothers in Christ.

It is concern for others that also motivates Paul to speak about the women not wearing "costly attire" or "expensive clothes" - because doing such a thing would introduce class distinctions into the Body of Christ and would be a potential source of division and disunity amongst the members of the congregation that were not as well off and who were only too aware that the cost of one single outfit was more than they would take home in wages on any given week. For God's people to continue behaving in such a manner in the face of their brothers and sisters who were struggling to make ends meet would have been a blatantly unloving thing to do and a potentially divisive thing to do.

Now, of course, you have to be careful not to slip into legalism here. Paul is not endorsing drabness, as one commentator puts it. He is not saying that women should dress in potato sacks and burlap bags. He is not saying that there is anything necessarily wrong with dressing nicely or wearing stylish clothing. Certainly there is freedom here for the Christian woman. Nevertheless, as is the case in other places in Scripture (1 Cor 8), Christians must never use their freedom to destroy a brother or sister in Christ or to cause them to stumble. To do so is to "sin against Christ", as Paul puts it.

A fourth and final matter that has a bearing here is the matter of worship itself and, specifically, what or who is the object of worship when we come together? Simply put, the focal point of our worship is God himself. Not preachers, not singers, not any other person or thing. But if someone comes into the midst of God's gathered people - all done up and with an outer presentation that says, "Look at me, look at me, look at me" - then that person is not acting consistently with her profession as a person who desires to worship God and see God receive all the glory and attention and praise that is rightfully His, and His alone.

And so, at the heart of all this is something that is bigger than a list of "do's and don'ts" with regard to the issues of beauty and one's personal appearance. What Paul

has in view here has more to do with issues of consistency between what we profess and how we live. It has to do with issues of moderation and self-control, to be sure, but it is also more deeply related to who we are and whose we are and who is the focal point of our worship. It has to do with thinking about beauty and adornment and personal appearance - not as our culture defines these things - but as God defines them - with learning to value what God values, and see as beautiful, that which God says is beautiful.

If Christians are known for anything, if they have any reputation at all, it ought to be for how they live, the deeds that characterize their life - and not how they look or how they dress.