

TRUE BEAUTY

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You may have heard it said that one of the differences between a man and a woman is that when a man looks at himself in the mirror, he admires the one physical feature about himself that's attractive, while a woman only sees the features she considers unattractive.

I can't verify that this is true of men, but it certainly seems true about women. Whether real or imagined, our eyes hone in on our "imperfections." We see the blemish. We compare ourselves to the world's current ideal of beauty and always come up short.

Today's woman faces intense pressure to conform to a perfect physical ideal. Is it any wonder so many go to drastic measures to change their bodies? A recent study indicated that American women spent a *half-billion* dollars in one year on shape-enhancing garments. Over the last eight years, cosmetic surgery procedures among women have increased by a dramatic 165 percent, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. The top five cosmetic surgeries for women are liposuction, breast augmentation, eyelid surgery, facelift, and tummy tuck—with no end in sight for the demand.¹ From Argentina to Japan, women of every culture are submitting with increasing frequency to the knife. In Mexico nose jobs are the status gift for girls celebrating their *quinceanera*, the traditional coming-of-age fifteenth birthday party. Just over the border, their California peers are getting breast augmentation procedures as a high school graduation gift.²

This isn't a new trend. Author Robin Marantz Henig provides this historical overview of the price of perfection:

Over the centuries, women have mauled and manipulated just about every body part—lips, eyes, ears, waists, skulls, foreheads, feet—that did not quite fit into the cookie-cutter ideal of a particular era's fashion. 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 Mangbettu wrapped the heads of female infants in pieces of giraffe hide to attain the elongated, cone-shaped heads that were taken to be a sign of beauty and intelligence. During the Renaissance, well-born European women plucked out hairs, one by one, from their natural hairlines all the way back to the crown of their heads, to give themselves the high, rounded foreheads thought beautiful at the time. . . .

Among the Padaung people of early-twentieth-century Burma, the ideal of female beauty involved a greatly elongated neck, preferably fifteen inches or more. This was accomplished by fitting girls with a series of brass neck rings. At a very young age, girls began by wearing five rings; by the time they were fully grown they were wearing as many as twenty-four, piled one on top of another. . . .

The weight of the rings leads to crushed collarbones and broken ribs, and the vertebrae in the neck become stretched and floppy. Indeed, these women wear the rings round-the-clock because, without them, their stretched-out necks are too weak to support their heads.³

The author goes on to capture the frenzied search for ideal female beauty. Overweight women in England in the 1600s were bled; chic women in the 1930s swallowed tapeworms. Queen Elizabeth I, in search of porcelain skin, used a potentially deadly combination of vinegar and lead that resulted in the total corrosion of her skin. Ancient Egyptian women used drops of antimony sulfide to make their eyes glitter, eventually destroying their vision. Victorian women

summoned their maids to tight-lace them into corsets, cutting off their oxygen and displacing internal organs in order to achieve an eighteen-inch waist. Flappers in the 1920s folded their breasts to simulate a fashionably flat torso or used constricting devices like the one from the Boyish Form Brassiere Company.

That might sound quite primitive until you consider the relatively recent recall of silicone implants that had been inserted into the chests of more than a million American women. Silicone wasn't much of an improvement over the materials used by an early cosmetic surgeon named Charles Miller in 1903. By Miller's own account, he was opening women's chests and inserting "braided silk, bits of silk floss, particles of celluloid, vegetable ivory and several other foreign materials."⁴

DIGITAL DRESS-UP

The temptation for women to be preoccupied with their physical appearance has always existed. However, it appears that contemporary women are more driven in their pursuit of physical beauty than ever. Blitzed by the media, we are presented continuously with voices and images that define what we are to look like. In previous centuries, 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. That image of beauty is so narrow in its range that most women feel unattractive in comparison.

Even worse is the deception in the fashion industry itself. Did you know that most of the models we see in the magazines don't even look like their *own* pictures? Fashion magazine editors admit that almost every photograph of a model has been digitally altered. So think about it: This alluring model has been toned by her personal trainer, had her hair done by a professional stylist, her face painted by a professional makeup artist, and her image captured by a professional photographer under ideal lighting. After this, if the model *still* doesn't look good enough, she is recast through computer graphics.

CRAVINGS FROM THE HEART

This begs the question, why? Why are women so obsessed with physical beauty? Why would women go to such extremes to be beautiful as culturally defined? Why aren't we pleased with "normal"?

The answer is simple and sobering: Our hearts are full of evil desires and sinful lusts. And to differing degrees our hearts have believed the lie that physical beauty will bring satisfaction and recognition. You know the false promises: *If you're beautiful, you will be happy and successful. You will be popular among the women, and 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.*

These are all things our sinful hearts crave. We lust for success, recognition, significance, importance, and approval. We become obsessed with making ourselves physically beautiful in an attempt to satisfy these sinful cravings. Yet the message is a lie. Physical beauty doesn't ensure happiness, fulfillment, or success. We can validate this fact by observing the most physically attractive women in the world.

Consider Princess Diana. She was the most photographed woman in the world. She became a celebrity of unprecedented magnitude. Yet she lived a troubled life. Her fairy-tale marriage to Prince Charles ended in divorce. Her subsequent relationships with other men all ended unhappily. She admitted to persistent bouts of depression, chronic loneliness, ongoing bulimia, and even several suicide attempts. She went to a number of psychotherapists, all to no avail. Her life ended tragically when she was just thirty-six years old.

Physical beauty does not deliver as advertised. It does not produce the happiness and success that the beguiling voices in our society promise. Our culture puts forth a false standard of beauty and a false message about beauty, but ultimately the wickedness already resident in the human heart is what motivates us to believe such lies and pursue them.

GOD'S DEFINITION OF BEAUTY

We are exhorted in Romans 12:2 not to allow the world around us to squeeze us into its mold. We need to ask ourselves if we have been cap-

tivated by our culture's definition of beauty or God's. Do our thoughts and actions regarding our 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.

Scripture reveals the falsehood and the futility of the quest for physical beauty. "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting" (Prov. 31:30). "Charm" in the Hebrew means bodily form. Form and beauty are two things that our culture esteems and pursues with fervor; yet God exposes our pursuit of the perfect figure and beauty to be idolatrous.

A survey of physically beautiful women in the Bible confirms the truth of Proverbs. Physical beauty is more often associated with trouble and temptation than with 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. The accounts of Sarah (Gen. 12:11-20), Rebekah (Gen. 26:7-11), and Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1-20) are a few examples. Nowhere in the Bible are women instructed to wish for, ask for, or strive for physical beauty. Instead, God's Word 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. Instead, it can actually create greater potential for being snared by sin (Prov. 6:23-26).

However, there is a kind of beauty that we *are* to pursue. First Peter 3:4-5 tells us that our beauty "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."

God's definition of beauty stands in stark contrast to the way our culture defines beauty. Our culture defines beauty by how we look on the outside. God defines beauty by what we are like 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 just respond to His work of grace in our lives.

Our culture encourages women to cultivate a beauty that is skin deep. God tells us to pursue an inner beauty of great worth.

Our culture encourages women to cultivate a beauty that will only last for a brief time. God encourages women to cultivate a beauty that will never fade and that will only grow more attractive with the passing of time.

Our culture calls us to cultivate a beauty that impresses others. God summons us to cultivate a beauty that is first and foremost for *His* eyes.

Our culture entices 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 in the past who put their hope in God.

Do you see the difference? The beauty our culture esteems may turn some heads, but the beauty God calls us to cultivate will make a lasting impact. When a physically attractive woman walks by, we notice—men particularly! But that's the end of it. Her beauty makes a fleeting, 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 she touches. Godly, inner beauty makes an indelible mark on the lives of others and glorifies God.

HEART CHECK

Which beauty are we seeking to cultivate? Are we intentionally cultivating inner beauty, or do we give more attention to the outward appearance? The way we think about and attend to our personal appearance is really a mirror of our hearts. By reflecting either godly motivations or selfish motivations, we reveal whether our priority is to cultivate inner beauty or outer beauty.

Here's a "heart check" test for the purpose of self-examination—questions to help us discern our thoughts, motives, and goals with regard to the issue of beauty. These questions have helped me to see that all too often my desire is for self-glory rather than God's glory. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I spend more time daily caring for my personal appearance than I do in Bible study, prayer, and worship?

2. Do I spend excessive money on clothes, hair, and makeup, or is it an amount that is God-honoring?

3. Do I want to lose weight to “feel better about myself,” or do I desire to be self-disciplined for the glory of God?

4. Am I on a quest for thinness to impress others, or do I seek to cultivate eating habits that honor God?

5. Do I exercise to try to create or maintain a “good figure,” or do I exercise to strengthen my body for God’s service?

6. Is there anything about my appearance that I wish I could change, or am I fully grateful to God for the way He created me?

7. Am I jealous of the appearance of others, or am I truly glad when I observe other women who are more physically attractive than I?

8. Do I covet the wardrobe of others, or do I genuinely rejoice when other women are able to afford and purchase new clothing?

9. When I attend an event or activity, do I sinfully compare myself with others, or do I go asking God to show me whom to love and how to do it?

10. Do I ever dress immodestly or with the intent of drawing attention to myself, or do I always dress in a manner that pleases God?

Asking these questions on a consistent basis can help us weed out worldly values and cultivate a heart for God’s priorities.

“TEN LOOKS AT CHRIST”

By God’s grace we can put to death the evil desires in our hearts that crave attention from others and that lead us to compare ourselves with others. Colossians 3:1-5 gives us the key to being freed from self-absorption:

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 minds 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.

Do you see the progression in these verses? Before we are told to put to death our “evil desires,” we are told to put our hearts and minds “on things above.”

The starting point for all repentance is setting our hearts and minds “on things above.” This means to direct our attention toward Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. To set our hearts and minds “on things above” means to intentionally focus on Jesus Christ and to 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.

Robert Murray McCheyne had a wonderful antidote to self-focus. He suggested that we should take ten looks at Christ for every look at ourselves. Every time we are tempted to be discouraged by our own disappointing performance, we must look to our Savior whose perfect performance has been credited to us. Jesus died to redeem us from both the *penalty* and the *power* of sin in our lives. May we revel in His grace and marvel at His mercy in our lives! To set our hearts and minds on the things above means to be taken up with the beauty of His amazing grace and His undeserved mercy in our lives.

PRACTICAL CHANGES

Let’s consider some practical changes in our thinking and behavior that we may need to make to develop biblical beauty goals. First, we have to resolve whom we are to trying please in our pursuit of beauty.

Single women, you have only one person to please: The Lord should be the object of your pursuit for beauty (1 Cor. 7:34). All your thoughts, motives, and actions related to beauty should be for the eyes of One and One only.

Married women, we have two to please: God and our husbands. It might sound like heresy to say that we are to consider the opinion of someone besides God, but let me explain. God calls a married woman to please her husband; so therefore you are pleasing God when you seek to please your husband. You need to find out your husband’s preferences with regard to how you care for your appearance. How does he want you to dress, style your hair, or wear (or not wear)

cosmetics? As a way to reverence your husband, you need to take care of your physical appearance in a way that appeals to him.

Seeking to please the Lord does not mean that we neglect our personal appearance. Pure devotion to God will produce an appropriate concern for physical appearance. A godly woman will seek to present an outward appearance that honors God and attracts others to her character.

It is not wrong to seek to enhance our own appearance, but we need to evaluate our motives and our commitment to modesty. It is not necessarily evil to wear stylish clothing and an attractive hairstyle. It is not sinful to wear makeup and jewelry. The Proverbs 31 woman wore colorful, high-quality clothing. The bride in the Song of Solomon adorned her appearance with jewelry. We are told that Esther underwent twelve months of beauty treatments—six months with oil and myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. The Bible does not condemn wearing and using these things. It is wearing them for the wrong reasons that God's Word forbids.

When the Lord is the object of our desire for beauty, we will have a proper concern about our own physical appearance. As John Piper says 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.”⁵

HIS DESIGN, HIS CLAIM

In the pursuit of true beauty, we each need to acknowledge God's providence and receive with gratefulness the body and appearance He has given to us.

I know this isn't easy. I've always disliked the appearance of my hands. Though I've complained through the years about my thin, fine hair and my knobby knees, I used to be overly concerned about the appearance of my hands. I have very long fingers and veins that pop out no matter what I do. I remember being mortified one day in high school when a girl sitting next to me in orchestra class began scrutinizing my hands. “Your fingers are *so* long!” she announced loudly as

she held up her small hand to mine in comparison. But that wasn't enough. She also required verification from *everyone* in the class about the extraordinary extra half-inch of fingertip that I possessed. After her comments, my disdain for my hands only grew greater.

Years later, however, the Holy Spirit was kind enough to use a passage of Scripture to correct my attitude toward my hands. I discovered Proverbs 31 where the woman of virtue is described as working with "eager hands" (v. 13). Also, "she opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy" (v. 20). The King James Version mentions her hands six times, commending the wisdom of a woman who, by the fruit of her hands, can buy a field and plant a vineyard.

I realized my hands weren't merely decorative—they had a kingdom purpose! I saw how sinful (not to mention silly!) it was to care about the *appearance* of my hands instead of my Creator's *purpose* in making them. God has given me these hands as a means of grace to serve and reach out to others.

A loving God has determined what we each look like. 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—right down to our fingers! We can either spend our lives pining about the results of God's determination or we can receive with gratefulness His design, knowing that He does all things for His glory.

David said, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). When was the last time you worshiped God for the way He created your body? Anything less than a heart filled with gratitude and praise to God for our physical appearance is sinful and grieves the Lord.

WE BELONG TO ANOTHER

We need to remember that our bodies are not our own. First Corinthians 6 says, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. . . . You are not your own. . . . Therefore honor God with your body" (vv. 19-20).

Do you treat your body as if it is not your own, tending to it as if belonged to another? We usually take extra-special care of something

that belongs to someone else. Some years ago, after a special event at our church, a kind woman gave me the centerpiece from her table. It was a beautiful flower arrangement that she had created and displayed in a china teapot. She graciously told me to enjoy the flowers and return the teapot at my convenience. I did enjoy that flower arrangement, but you can be sure I took special care of that china teapot! I kept it out of the reach of my little boy, who was three at the time, and I exhorted all my daughters to be especially careful with it. I took special care with this china teapot because it belonged to someone else, and I wanted to return it undamaged.

In the same way, your body is not your own—it belongs to God. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit—you house the Holy Spirit in your own body! That should make all the difference in how you treat it. This new understanding of our bodies can change not only what we do, but why we do it.

We need to be disciplined in our exercise not merely to look better, but so we can have more energy to serve God.

We should be self-controlled in what we eat not merely to maintain a certain weight, but because self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

Knowing we belong to God changes our motive in caring for the body He has given us.

ADORNED IN MODESTY

God's Word provides the standard for how we are to clothe our bodies:

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 is proper for women making a claim to godliness.

—1 TIM. 2:9-10, NASB

Our dress is to be proper, modest, and discreet. These three criteria can help us evaluate whether our clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, and makeup are within biblical guidelines.

Let's consider the word *modest* for a moment. The word has an interesting meaning in the Greek. It means *shamefacedness* or *shame-fast-*

ness. The root idea is a sense of shame. This raises the question, of what are we to be ashamed? The text refers to shame in the sense that we should be ashamed if we ever contribute to a man's lustful thinking by our dress. We should be ashamed if we ever cause a man to stumble by our clothing. I don't think any of us is ignorant of the fact that the more of our bodies we expose, the more temptation that provides for men. We should carry a sense of shame about ever causing such a distraction. As we dress, we need to check the motives of our hearts. We should ask ourselves, why am I dressed this way? Am I trying to draw attention to God or to myself? Am I seeking to glorify God or to impress others?

I know that what's fashionable is often immodest, but regardless of how difficult it may be to find modest clothing, there can be no compromise in this area. In trying to determine if something is modest or not, it is helpful to involve others, to seek their counsel and wisdom. I know many women who have invited their friends to give specific feedback about their wardrobe. I am especially encouraged when I hear of teenage girls who are committed to this standard!

FROM "CONTENTIOUS" TO "PRINCESS"

Does the pursuit of godly beauty sound like a lot of work? I hope not. There is actually a wonderful freedom and hope in being set free from an idolatrous focus on self. Most importantly, unlike the physical beauty associated with youth, true beauty grows more lovely with the passing of time. We should be most beautiful when we are sixty, seventy, and older.

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. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

—1 PETER 3:3-6

This passage informs us that we can actually become more attractive by cultivating “the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” This godly beauty will cause others to notice; and if we are married, it will make us attractive to our husbands. Most important, it captures the attention of God Himself. It is a mystery how the beauty that we cultivate inwardly can be evident outwardly. But Scripture promises us that the more we adorn our inner self, the lovelier we will become.

Have you ever met a woman who displays this kind of extraordinary beauty, actually growing more attractive the older she gets? Elisabeth Elliot is one such woman in my eyes (though she would be embarrassed to hear me say so). When I met her, she was in her seventies. She is gray-headed, and her skin is wrinkled, as you would expect for a woman her age. Yet she possesses a rare beauty. First Peter 3 provides the explanation. No doubt this woman of God has sought to cultivate “the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” I want to have that kind of beauty as I get older.

The apostle Peter describes a woman who had this kind of timeless beauty. He singles out Sarah as one “who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear” (verse 6).

I’m glad Peter chose Sarah to be the poster girl for “a gentle and quiet spirit,” because that wasn’t characteristic of her in her youth. She started life as Sarai, meaning “contentious.” That name accurately describes some of the accounts of her life as a younger woman. She displayed jealousy, she was manipulative and cynical, and she was downright mean in the way she treated Hagar. She was hardly the picture of “a gentle and quiet spirit.” Yet God is in the name-changing business. He changed the name Sarai to Sarah, which means “princess.” At some point Sarah became a woman with that humble and quiet spirit—a woman who hoped in God and was submissive to her husband. Scripture records that Abraham buried her with great mourning and love.

I draw tremendous encouragement from the life of Sarah because there is hope for me and for any believing woman who desires to be truly beautiful in the eyes of the Lord. We can become “princesses” at

any age; it's never too late. The reality is that one day my knobby knees will fail, my thin hair will turn completely gray, and my hands will still be long *and* have age spots. These physical features will actually get *worse*. But if I keep my eyes on the One who is loveliness incarnate, I will grow more beautiful by reflecting Him. That is truly valuable, and the Bible says it is of great worth in God's sight. It's a beauty regimen we should all practice.

1. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons' (ASPS) media summary, issued August 18, 2000 by the ASPS media center.
2. "Reshaping the World" sidebar summary by Mac Margolis, Paige Bierma, Mahion Meyer, Hideko Takayama, and Shehnaz Suterwalia, in *Newsweek International* (Atlantic Edition), August 16, 1999, 38.
3. Robin Marantz Henig, "The Price of Perfection," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 15, Number 2, Winter 1997, 34-38. The article originally appeared in the May/June 1996 issue of *Civilization* and was reprinted with permission.
4. *Ibid.*, 35.
5. John Piper, *A Godward Life, Book Two* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1999), 64.