The Why Behind Appearance Guidelines

*Why dressing to honor the Lord (modesty) matters.*

*In short: Even though we know God loves us no matter what, we practice modesty to honor God and to be considerate of others.*

*“I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.”* This is from Leviticus 11:44 where the LORD is speaking to Israelites so that they may know who they are in Him. Though this book has a common thought of being boring and full of irrelevant laws for Christians to follow, it is in contrast overflowing with the fact that God is the one who makes us holy, in fact, between chapters 11-22 the phrase, *“I who make you holy”* is made 12 times or at referenced. This is an outstanding phrase in a book that is considered to be about living and doing to be Holy. Certainly “living and doing” has a place but it is not to gain righteousness but rather to honor God. God does not love us any more or any less because of the way we dress. His love is unconditional towards his greatest creation. This is not a controlling legalistic idealism but rather a way we can show grace to each other just as Christ has shown us grace. May we seek holiness in all areas of our lives in a way that honors God and shows love and kindness to others?

It is in this very phrase that we need to be holy because God is holy that offers us the best way to live, talk, and dress in a way that doesn’t bring attention to ourselves to God. The Old Testament is riddled with the idea of a priesthood of people that belong to God, the Israelites, and this same theme is carried in the New Testament where in 1 Peter this same thought is expressed for the believers in Jerusalem. 1 Peter 1:15-16 says, *“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written be holy, because I am Holy.”* Here Peter is saying that in all that we do we should be holy. This means how we talk, joke, what media we engage with and especially how we act and dress. This holiness or even perfection is not the idea of being without blemish but rather a seeking to be morally pure which makes us separate from the world. This is not to gain more love or grace from God but rather a key response to how he has shown us love, grace and compassion. His love for us is not dependent on our actions but it is rather just who he is as our God. He loves and lavishes us with his grace and mercy.

Peter later writes in chapter 2:9, *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.”* We are these very descriptive words: chosen, priesthood, holy nation, and belonging to God. As we continue into this, we want the emphasis to be more on a personal pursuit of holiness in all areas of lives especially in how we dress. This is not to bring shame, guilt or oppression but rather a change in our thoughts of purity and holiness. By doing this with the verses mentioned so far, we can see how it is God who makes us holy and not our own striving but in the same vein, it is our responsibility to pursue holiness.

In Romans 12:1, Paul is addressing the Church of Rome, who to live our lives. *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”*  When we take this in mind and think through what it means to be a living sacrifice, we must first consider what is the significance of being a sacrifice? Christ’s death on the cross was the last sacrifice that involved a death to make an atonement for the sins of humanity. It is no longer the blood of bulls and rams but rather that of the perfect one, Christ. Now in return, we as Christians seek to give our lives totally to Christ and our lives in turn become a sacrifice for the cause of Christ. We should not do this out of obligation from authority but we ought to do this in our personal pursuit of holiness and not wanting any stain from the world to be on us.

One of the most common responses to this topic which can be stated as modesty, is connected to a rigid legalistic set rules and values that somehow translate to one’s spot in holiness. This is not the case, because no matter how many good works we do they are still considered like dirty rags *(Isaiah 64:6).* Perhaps we have been looking at this through an incomplete lens which has made something that was meant as a way to honor God became a litmus test for holiness. We agree with author Mary A. Kassian, a guest contributor for desiring God, writes in an article, *“Modesty has a lot more to do with the condition of our hearts than the specifics of our wardrobe.”* Our attitudes toward holiness, purity, and modesty is ultimately an outward expression of where our heart is on this matter.

Jesus spoke to this in Matthew 6:21, which is in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is speaking to what we treasure in our hearts. *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* How does this speak to modesty, purity, and holiness? It points that if our hearts are desirous of others noticing us and our physical features this points to selfishness and in some ways being a person to be worshipped. Rather, the place our hearts should be to point others to Christ who is the one who should be the one who is worshipped. If our concern is more to show off our bodies we are then desiring to worship the creature than the creator *(Romans 1:25).*

As we consider one another in how we dress, we are each responsible for our actions, but we also are to consider each other as more sacred than ourselves (Romans 14:13). This mentality allows us to not want to do anything that would cause a sister or brother in Christ to stumble. Again, we emphasize we are each responsible for our own actions, we are still responsible for each other as well. In seeking the unity of Christ we ought to have one mind in this which is that of Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5). It is up to us to encourage each other in the work of the gospel and that includes not allowing the way we dress to impact the holiness of the full body of Christ. If the way we dress, both male and female, brings someone into a temptation of lust are we truly loving them well? This is a matter of protecting those around us from stumbling. 1 Corinthians 8:9 states. *“Be careful, however, that the exercise of y our freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.”* Though this passage is talking of food scarified to idols, the principle is very similar, in that, it is the duty of the stronger brother to not allow the weaker one to stumble into temptation. What this isn’t saying is that there is an inherently weaker brother, but that we do not always know the struggles of a sister or brother in Christ. This allows us to be able to others to Christ, and not ourselves so that the Lord is the one who is glorified in how we dress.

One final point that Scripture makes very clear for all believers is this, *“Do you not know that your bodies are temples 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 bodies.”* 1 Corinthians 6:”19-20 is so crucial for the understanding of who we are as Christians. In a world that values autonomous decisions and subjective group identity when it is convenient for responsibility of others, Paul is telling the Corinthians that we have been bought by Christ. Imagine a church building that is filled with other deities, altars, and creatures that are being worshipped. This would not be an effective place for Christians to worship, so then why do we do this with our bodies? If we are indeed a temple for the Holy Spirit, should we not care for it as such? We ought to treat our bodies in the fullness of knowing we are a temple (place of dwelling for the Lord), and we are not our own. This means we do not make decisions which are best for us, but rather we change the way we see our identity not as someone living with God when we choose, but rather God being the one who gives us this identity as a temple.

These are truths that have been highlighted from the Scriptures: be holy because God is holy, God makes us holy, being a living sacrifice, this is ultimately a heart problem, the need to consider others as we live in a community, and we are a temple for the Holy Spirit. Take time to evaluate the Scripture and what they say about living our lives and being holy. Though many verses have been used to oppress, hurt, and create a hostile environment for our sisters and brothers in Christ, it is my desire that we seek holiness for ourselves and others. We would like for us to leave with this:

*As we live in a community that is desirous of honoring and glorifying God in all that we do we want to include that our bodies are a temple of the Lord and should be treated as such. We are not wanting to draw attention to ourselves but rather see that the way we dress and live our lives point ourselves and others towards to Christ.*