

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Modesty

Modesty? Really?

We do not live in a modest age, and some say that's a good thing. Talk of modesty is outmoded, old-fashioned, perhaps anti-woman, shaming, and above all LAME. Our teenagers (and some of us) will almost certainly share this perspective, and rightly so—if we frame the issue in the wrong way.

So much modesty talk today ends in a deadlock, with parents and leaders straight up asserting that certain things shouldn't be worn, and teenagers crossing their arms in anger and defiance, promising themselves that the moment they get outside their parents' and leaders' jurisdiction, they'll dress however they want—and that until then, they'll push every envelope and test every boundary they can. Needless to say, this is not the mutually upbuilding life we want to cultivate, even if we're sure our side of the debate is the right one.

Sometimes Christian ministries have attempted to make the old ways of talking about modesty more palatable by getting cooler, younger, more conventionally beautiful people to speak about the issue. This hasn't really worked out, because, as we so often find, our teenagers are intelligent and not likely to be fooled by the simple addition of "coolness" to our lessons. What we want to do here is reframe the modesty issue in a way that is more helpful, more fair, and—as it turns out—more biblical than most of the accounts of modesty we can find today. We'll redefine modesty, redirect the conversation about modesty, and hopefully realize along the way that the modesty talk does not have to be the lame headache it has been for several decades now.

— What is modesty?

For this guide, we'll define modesty as "humility in public." One of the mistakes that Christians make when talking about modesty is limiting the idea of modesty to being about women's clothing. That makes any talk about modesty focus unfairly on women and girls. Modesty chats become one of the many contradictory signals women hear about who they are and how they are supposed to act. But if we open our eyes to the broader issue, we will find that modesty is a virtue that could do more than make women second guess their wardrobe. It could have implications for everyone.

— What does it mean to live in an immodest culture?

It means that everyone everywhere is fed lies about the necessity of showing off whatever good they have or do. Attention is power. Therefore, image is everything.

In our culture, attention brings status, validity, meaning. Likes, looks, and the admiration of others are [the coin of our social realm](#). And, like coins and all other things of human value, attention is scarce. It is a limited commodity that we must compete with others to receive. There is a constant (rather strange) race to keep up with the latest fashions, ways of speaking, and ways of thinking that mark us as worthy of people's focus. The worst thing, we are told, is to go unnoticed.

So, from all sides in our culture, we are prompted to show off, show out, and show each other

up. Even professional bowlers [do victory dances now](#). Pastors are preaching in [\\$3,000 shoes](#). Parents just *happen* to mention what good grades their daughter got or how much fun their son is having at the beautiful and expensive summer camp he gets to go to. Of course, people have always waved symbols of their status in other people's faces. But for the first time in history, thanks to many more clothing and food options and social media, almost everyone can curate his or her public image. Everyone knows intuitively what kinds of pictures, statements, and other content they should post or publish in order to look like good mothers, pastors, members of political parties, fashionistas, sports gurus, outdoorsman, intellectuals, etc., etc. Everyone wants to look "cool" or "cute." We even [broadcast the good](#) we do (or seem to do) so that everyone can see it. Image is everything.

For everyone. We *all* feel the pressure and longing to conform to the latest fashions, decorate in ways that communicate our goodness, and tactfully but effectively make known our accomplishments, talents, and painfully-but-cheerfully-done good deeds. We *all* know the fear of not being noticed, the desire to be seen and praised, and the importance of fitting in. And the world has learned to capitalize on that.

— How does our immodest culture affect women in particular?

The world's attention economy places special pressure on women (younger and younger women) to show off, show out, and show each other up in terms of physical attractiveness. This pressure also comes with a message about what the ideal body looks like and how the ideal body should be dressed. Jean Killbourne has been pointing this out for four decades now in her absolutely must-see educational [documentaries](#) on [advertising's image of women](#). (You can watch one for free [here](#).) She explains:

The first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty, so that we all learn how important it is for a woman to be beautiful and exactly what it takes. Women learn from a very early age that we must spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and above all money striving to achieve this ideal, and feeling ashamed and guilty when we fail... Not only is [this ideal] the only standard of beauty, it's the ultimate standard of worth, so that women are judged against the standard all the time, whether we choose to be or not.

So the constant message is not simply "be beautiful." The message is, "The highest priority in life is to be beautiful. You, unfortunately, are not beautiful, but you could be, with these clothes, this product, this makeup, this hairstyle, this workout routine, this attitude, this, this, this..." This messaging is an important factor in determining what women want to wear.

An important aspect of the world's ideal for female beauty is sexiness. Of course this does not mean that every woman who wears revealing clothing is making a conscious choice to be tempting, but the message that women must be sexy is taken in subconsciously, through the thousands of messages we receive each day. Killbourne explains:

Our girls are getting the message today—so young—that they have to be incredibly thin and beautiful and hot and sexy and that they're going to fail.... Girls are encouraged to present themselves as strippers and porn stars, to remove their pubic hair, and to be sexually available while expecting little or nothing in return.... As they learn that their sexual behavior will be rewarded, they learn to sexualize themselves.

Many trends in female fashion aid in this sexualization, whether the people who wear them are

conscious of it or not. It's worth noting that Killbourne is a prominent feminist academic, not a Christian.

Why do women believe this messaging, apart from the fact that, like all human beings, they want to be admired? In recent decades, the main argument in defense of the message that women should be sexy has been that feminine power resides in sexuality. A *New York Times* [article](#) about the cultural significance of the [bikini](#) exemplifies the typical association of sexually suggestive attire with personal empowerment:

The bikini has undergone a transition from a symbol of languorous sexuality... to a symbol of tough, bloodletting, physical showmanship... [T]he tiny, triangle-topped bikini is the millennial equivalent of the power suit—the costume for women who ride 20-foot waves or smash the foreheads of evildoers, thus proving they are just as combative as men.

More examples of the “sex is power” message are not difficult to find. Pop stars like Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, Cardi B, Taylor Swift, Nicki Minaj, Camila Cabello—pretty much all of them—are marketed as bold, brash, “strong” women, confident in their own skin, daring in their expressions of their sexuality. A common narrative in other media features a female character being abused and then using her sexuality to gain power over her oppressors and get revenge, as in *Game of Thrones*, [Jennifer's Body](#), and other works. That sex is power was the promise of the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s and is still the promise today.

And it is still false. Monstrously, hideously, makes-women-waste-their-God-given-lives- and-talents false. “Sex is power” is a marketing strategy, not a pathway to liberation. Worse, it is a satanic trick. Those who think they can gain power through their sexuality may get small rewards in the short term, but ultimately that strategy creates a worse culture for other women and creates the conditions for their own exploitation.

So once again, our immodest culture prompts us all to seek power through attention, acceptance through image, and value through being seen. Provocative clothing worn by women and girls is only one manifestation of this larger issue. In this light, it's no wonder that women feel unfairly singled out when they hear modesty discussed as a female dress-code problem.

(Quick note: Though this pressure has been on women and girls for many years now, it's starting to affect men and boys much more. There's now [makeup for men](#), [muscle dysmorphia](#), and increasing pressure to have the perfect body—however that's defined. So for our sons who feel more pressure to look a certain way but want to honor God, it can be confusing because there's actually very *little* talk in Christian circles about how males are being affected, let alone how they can honor God and the women around them. Of course, the solution isn't to simply put the same pressure on them to cover up as we've historically put on women, which we'll discuss below.

— How should we *not* think about dressing modestly?

Probably the worst reason people give for dressing modestly is that men are “visual creatures” hardwired to respond sexually to the sight of female bodies. Women are told that revealing attire will make their body become a “stumbling block” to their brothers in Christ. Racy or suggestive clothing places an unbearable burden on boys striving for purity. Therefore, young women should cover up, lest they cause others to sin. Apart from the fact that young women [are very tired of hearing this](#), this reasoning is unwise for at least three reasons.

First, the “visual creatures” argument makes immodesty a sin that only young women can commit. All people should be expected to practice modesty, but this argument makes that impossible.

Second, the “visual creatures” argument demeans young men. To label young men as visual-stimulus-response machines is to make an act of their sinful will a law of their nature: “That’s just the way men are!” It is to tell young men that they are not and cannot be in control of their urges and desires. This is actually a form of objectification, depriving someone of agency and of responsibility for their actions. **When women become “stumbling blocks,” men become animals.** Also, telling young men that their lust can be blamed on women leads them to view women in general as problems, traps, or temptresses.

Third, the “visual creatures” argument over-sexualizes young women's bodies. Ironically, this argument's effect is the opposite of its intention. Telling women that their bodies are dangerous sources of temptation, and that the only way to combat this temptation is to cover up, forces them to view themselves as sexual objects covered in cloth. The main objective, it seems, is to shield others from what is inherently, independently productive of lust. Their bodies, this argument tells them, are dangerous things of only sexual significance.

Not surprisingly, over-sexualization produces shame. Young women come to understand themselves as carriers of unwilled evil, bad to the core. This happens especially to young women who happen to develop faster than their peers, since they are often singled out as dangerously curvy, busty, or whatever.

Also not surprisingly, over-sexualization produces promiscuity. Some young women, believing that their only source of power comes through their body's ability to arouse, accept the premise that their bodies trigger something in men that men can't control, but conclude that they should use their bodies to get what they want.

Worst of all, the “visual creatures” argument teaches young women to believe lies about their identity as God's image-bearers, fellow workers in God's cultural mandate, ambassadors in Jesus's great commission, sisters in the family of the Church, and temples of the Holy Spirit.

We are not saying that young women never dress provocatively in order to get attention from men—[of course they do](#). Young women are sinful human beings, not innocent dolts making uninformed choices. And we are not saying that young men should walk into sexually tempting situations because they think they should be able to will themselves through all temptation toward purity—of course they shouldn't! They should [flee sexual immorality](#). But the depersonalizing effects of much modesty talk [does more harm than good](#). If we want to approach modesty wisely, we need to appreciate what the Bible has to say about modesty as a *complete way of life for us all*, as well as a way of dressing.

— How does the Bible teach us to think about modesty as a way of life?

Jesus was born in a barn. He spent thirty years of his life in total obscurity working as an independent contractor in a backwater town. After those decades of work, He was still poor. Then He got baptized and retreated into the wilderness, out of the public eye, for a month and a half. His mom had to pressure Him into His first miracle. His miracles garnered a lot of attention,

though He did tell people to keep quiet about them. He had a habit of withdrawing often to the wilderness to pray by Himself ([Luke 5:16](#)). Sometimes, when His audiences grew too large, He would discourage people from following Him. In one-on-one conversations, He seemed to take pleasure in not letting people know who He was. After He had been arrested, He was conspicuously silent at His court proceedings (unlike Socrates, who talked and talked). After He had freed the world from sin, defeated death, risen from the dead, and obtained authority over all things, one of His dearest friends mistook Him for a gardener. This is the life of God on earth.

Something about Jesus made him completely immune to that sinful human need to hoard other people's attention. We find out what that something is in His teachings on modesty, or humility in public, which come mainly in [Matthew 6](#). If you find yourself having to give a "modesty talk" to teenagers, we suggest starting here.

Jesus begins, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven." Now the thing to notice first about this sentence is that what is being shown off is "righteousness," which is not, in itself, a bad thing. In fact, it's a great thing to practice righteousness. So the thing shown off is not the problem; it's the act of showing off, signalling to everyone that you are good, that Jesus forbids.

He then gives examples: the "hypocrites" give money, pray, and fast "that they may be seen by others." Elsewhere we learn that these men liked to wear special clothes and sit in special places and be called special names. They liked to call people out on their misdeeds in order to emphasize their own purity (much like those who get a kick out of informing women that they're dressed inappropriately). They were "trend-setters" in the business of religious practice. Their whole lives were ordered around getting people to look at them and say wow.

The trouble with this way of living, Jesus says, is that it works: "Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward." And that's all they receive. Their tireless work gains them a few human stares, and then they die. To be sure, a few human stares is much better than no human stares. Not being seen is probably a decent description of what Hell feels like. That's why what Jesus says next is crucial.

He instructs that when you give, pray, or fast, do it "in secret, and your heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward you." What made Jesus immune to the depraved need we all feel to snatch everyone's attention—to win our peers' approval and envy—was the gaze of His Father. Because He constantly felt the warm rays of God's loving presence on His skin, He had no need of the special clothes, names, and places, no need to sound a trumpet before He did a good deed, no need to do anything but hammer nails for the majority of His adult life. A life lived for the eyes of God alone, "not as to men but to God," is full of lasting, abundant reward and freedom.

This is Jesus' teaching on modesty. And in a world full of spectacle and scandal, full of hearts grasping after the attention we all need but should find in the Father, we really need to hear it. [We all really need to hear it.](#) Boys who want to show off their new muscles by going shirtless need to hear it. Men who find themselves mentioning the size of their This is Jesus' teaching on modesty. And in a world full of spectacle and scandal, full of hearts grasping after the attention we all need but should find in the Father, we really need to hear it. We all really need to hear it. Boys who want to show off their new muscles by going shirtless need to hear it. Men who find themselves mentioning the size of their bonuses need to hear it. Women who spend long hours calculating what images of their family and friends to post online need to hear it. Fathers who

like to boast about their boys' athletic accomplishments need to hear it. Mothers who clean the house to death before company comes over need to hear it. Straight-A students who like to ask other students "What did *you* get on the test?" need to hear it. Boisterous, charismatic pastors need to hear it. People with heads and mouths full of theology need to hear it. Bloggers, vloggers, and nearly naked joggers need to hear it. The fact is that many of us walk around trying to pick specks out of others' eyes, even though we're sporting mean pieces of lumber in our own when it comes to this issue. We should all take a moment and hear what Jesus says in another gospel: "As my Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." When we abide in the Father's love, there is no need for showing off.

— What does the Bible say about modest dress?

Much of the reasoning in the previous question applies to the question of how we should dress. Our bodies are good things, gifts of God just like our acts of righteousness, but showing them off in order to get people to stare is an activity that yields small, meaningless results. The same goes for clothing. We should acknowledge that we *want* to look good in public. It is a legitimate concern that we might develop a lackluster reputation or no reputation at all if we don't dress to impress. But that concern must be answered with Jesus' words: **Your Father sees you. You have quite a reputation in His infinite mind.**

But the Bible gives extra counsel to women on this issue, though it is often misread and misapplied. The classic biblical passage on modesty and clothing is [1 Timothy 2](#). The central verse is verse 9, but the context is key. Paul says:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

...

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.

We included the first paragraph to show that Paul's main concern is every Christian's participation in God's mission to reconcile the world to Himself in Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:19](#)). "Prayers" play a big role in that mission. Prayers, apart from affecting the course of history itself, lead to a "peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified [in a word, *modest*] in every way." Since prayer is time spent consciously in the presence of God, under the Father's loving gaze, it's no wonder that prayer makes us modest and leads us to love all people. Prayer cures our need for attention and frees us to love and do what is right.

Notice Paul's comprehensive vision here: peaceful and quiet, godly and dignified in *every* way. He gives specific examples of how this peace and quiet looks for the different members of his audience in the second paragraph. The men of Timothy's congregation are prone to "anger or quarrelling." They all need to be right, to set themselves apart by being right or appearing smart. They're "alpha males." They beat outsiders over the head with the Bible and do not pray for them. They obsess over winning arguments. As a result, God's desire for all people to know Jesus is counteracted. The world remains in darkness.

The women of Timothy's congregation "likewise also," just like the men, struggle to lead that prayerful, loving, humble, active life of internal and external peace and quiet. They spend lots and lots of time and money and energy on "costly attire." Just as the bickering of the men kept any good from getting done, so the women's focus on looking good distracts them from the all-important mission at hand, a life of good works. They want to be "alpha" attention-getters, not agents of restoration in the city where they live. Paul's message is incredibly forward thinking and empowering: What you *do* is what matters, not how you look and not how they see you. Modesty is not about sex, and [modest dressing is not anti-sex](#). Modesty is about freeing up your God-given, brilliant minds so that you can join with God to change the world. ***Dress for action, not for attention.***

It's significant that the Bible never tells women to be modest *in order to* keep men from lusting. True, the Proverbs warn young men to despise the advances and adornments of prostitutes and adulteresses. Proverbs teaches young men to practice temperance in the presence of women whose immodesty shows in the way they dress, and to avoid them when necessary. (Although, it's interesting at this point to note that Jesus tended to spend a lot of time with prostitutes...) But the classic modesty passage addressed to women does not make protecting men from lust the reason for modesty. Neither should we.

— How, then, should we dress?

Most of the stuff we read or listened to while researching for this guide assumes that "[we all know](#)" what modest dress will look like. Knee-length skirts, high necklines, one-piece bathing suits, and shirts that cover your stomach seem to be popular items. But to be honest, we are not impressed by wardrobe checklists. What cultures understand to be modest changes over time, and Christians would do well not to let culture (be it the culture of America or the culture of Saudi Arabia) set the standards for modest dress. Besides, it's easy to "cover up" and at the same time dress to make people stare at you in awe. "[Modest is hottest](#)" [misses the point entirely](#).

In the 1 Timothy passage above, Paul gives two concepts besides modesty to guide us in our selection of clothing. These concepts are *kosmios* and *sōphrosynē*. Clothing should be "respectable" and chosen with "self-control."

Kosmios has to do with appropriateness, orderliness, and fitness to the occasion. Later in the letter, potential overseers are said to be "respectable" in their conduct—that is, they do the right thing at the right time for the right result. Now, importantly, *kosmios* does carry connotations of beauty. It comes from the word *kosmos*, which often referred to the wonderful order and majesty in creation. It's where we get our word "cosmetics." So Paul is not saying that women's interest in looking good ought to be stamped out altogether. Rather, a respectable dresser will pay attention to the *context* in which she dresses. She will respect the rules of the building she will be in (her school, maybe) or the group she will be with in the way that she dresses, without trying to test the boundaries. She will also pay *Kosmios* has to do with appropriateness, orderliness, and fitness to the occasion. Later in the letter, potential overseers are said to be "respectable" in their conduct—that is, they do the right thing at the right time for the right result. Now, importantly, *kosmios* does carry connotations of beauty. It comes from the word *kosmos*, which often referred to the wonderful order and majesty in creation. It's where we get our word "cosmetics." So Paul is not saying that women's interest in looking good ought to be stamped out altogether. Rather, a respectable dresser will pay attention to the context in which she dresses. She will respect the rules of the building she will be in (her school, maybe) or the

group she will be with in the way that she dresses, without trying to test the boundaries. She will also pay attention to the message that her clothing sends about her, what character qualities people read onto women who wear certain things. This can be frustrating, because to a large extent, we can't control how other people will read what we wear. We may feel fine in a certain garment that others will perceive as provocative. We should never be *controlled* by the judgment of other people, but *sensitivity* to their perspective should play a role in our decision-making process. She will also pay attention to the event she is dressing for. So at a wedding, she will try not to upstage the bride. At Christmas, she will not get a kick out of shocking Grandma.

Sōphrosynē means soundness of mind, temperance, clear-headedness. In other words, Paul encourages these women to choose what they wear with a mind freed from the lies of the world and from the desires of their sinful hearts. This way of dressing contrasts with mindlessness or group-think as we shop or choose an outfit. So "I need to wear this because everyone's wearing it" isn't a good reason to wear something. Neither is "because it's *so cute*," if by *cute* you mean that you like it because everyone's wearing it. Rather, these sayings are signs that you're *not thinking for yourself*. The last thing Paul wants is to take choice away from us when it comes to our attire. His concern is that we'll simply "follow the course of this world" without asking, "Why does the world want me to dress this way? Why do I want to dress this way?" ([Ephesians 2:2](#)).

But let's not lose sight of the fact that those who approach modesty in the mindset that 1 Timothy 2 describes will simply *not obsess* over what they choose to wear. They will not spend a lot of money on what they wear. They will not rack their brains constantly about what other people will think. Nothing will be non-negotiable for them; if it turns out that they should change, it won't be a burden. They will recognize the voice in their head, the inner publicist that promises total abandonment if they don't look cute or hip or cool or any other word that basically means "how the world wants me to look" and will reply that they, like Jesus when He was abandoned by His friends, are "not alone, for the Father is with me.... Take heart. I have overcome the world" ([John 16:32-33](#)). Then they will put on their clothes and do some good!

— Is choosing to wear something because it looks good a legitimate motivation?

We believe that, for a person who has understood and rejected the ways the world stirs our desire for other people's approval, and understood how the world pressures women and girls (and more increasingly, men and boys, too) to think their only worth is in how attractive or "hot" they are, and learned to bask in the loving gaze of the Father, and considered the occasion for which they're dressing, and by God's grace have cultivated self-control and soundness of mind—for such a person, yes, choosing to wear something because it looks good on them is entirely legitimate and pleasing to God. Proverbs 31 positively describes a household in which everyone is wearing royal purple and gorgeous scarlet and fine linen ([Proverbs 31:21-22](#)). But these two verses are surrounded by ten verses on either side extolling other virtues. When it comes down to it, "strength and dignity" should be our "clothing" ([Proverbs 31:25](#)).

But there is more to be said here because we have an amazing opportunity in our time. In past cultures and in other parts of the world, the expressive, creative capacities of clothing have been minimized because of totalitarian rule or technological limitations. But now we have access to a huge range of clothing options, and some of our neighbors can detect extremely nuanced statements expressed in the subtlest combinations of cloth, color, and fit. Clothing has

become a widely available, expressive artform, a way of telling a story about what is true, good, or beautiful, about what it means to live a meaningful life, and much more. And for that reason, fashion, like business, education, etc. can be a mission field.

For all His emphasis on modesty, Jesus did teach that there was a way to “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” ([Matthew 5:16](#)). **Modesty is the expression of our status as children of light in the way that we dress.** We show that we are not controlled by the elementary principles of this world, by the fads and crazes that tell us what clothes we “must have” or “should wear,” lest we be left behind, forgotten, or teased. This applies to the “modest” fads and crazes that run rampant in Christian subcultures as well (scarves come to mind here, for some reason). *More than anyone else*, Christians are *free to be individuals* when it comes to fashion. Anyone who complains that modesty, as we are discussing it now, dooms people to plain and uninspired dress simply lacks imagination. We never dress in order to get attention, but to be honest, dressing more Christianly might mean you need to become more creative about your wardrobe, not less. Christians should not merely look like they are from a past age, but from another planet entirely, for “[we seek the city that is to come](#)” (Hebrews 13:14).

So to those who love fashion as an artform, we say “Go you!” as long as the style you promote is reasonably priced, justly manufactured, respectable, modest, and not designed to demean, demote, or needlessly offend other people. By all means, glorify God in your body. We serve a God whose robe fills the temple. Dressing as though that God is watching might lead us to put on outlandish outfits indeed.

— How can I talk to my teenagers about modesty?

We hope that the previous questions will give you some talking points when it comes to the “modesty talk.” But beyond those talking points, here are some things we can do to help our teenagers embrace Christlike humility in public.

First, we can *adopt a culture of modesty in our households*. Modesty is a virtue for all Christian people to practice. We could discuss Jesus’s teaching on modesty and ask in what ways we, as parents, have acted in order to be seen by others. We could confess to our teens that we like to brag about this or that to our relatives. We could acknowledge, out loud, how much pressure we feel to keep up with the Joneses or look good in public. For some of us, this might mean taking big steps of obedience, like selling our house and buying a smaller one, or emptying our closets. This also might mean smaller steps like changing a profile picture. When we are taking these steps in front of our children, it will be easier to ask them to do likewise.

Second, we can *help our teens, especially our girls, understand the ways the world tries to make women obsess about how they look*. We’ve already mentioned Jean Killbourne’s documentaries above. It can be very helpful for everyone in the family to know how cruel and tricky the world is toward women, how much the deck is stacked against their success in this and other areas (and the same point can be made, in different ways, for men). But this sort of instruction must also take place in open conversation, in which we tell stories about what it was like for us to grow up when we did, about the pressures we felt to buy this or that, wear this or that, act in this or that way. It is incredibly hard for a teenager to see that what seems like his heart’s desire is often what everyone else is longing for, and that the real, underlying desire is to fit in. The biblical category of the “the world” is helpful here.

Third, we can *never stop talking about how much the Father sees and loves us*. It is easy in day-to-day life to focus on the dos and don'ts, the moral principles, the rules and strategies we want our children to adopt, but Jesus knew that even adults need to hear and hear repeatedly, "Your Father sees you." Moreover, not just our mouths but also our behaviors have to reflect the constant loving presence of the Father.

Fourth, and finally, we can *help our teenagers become more conscious of their choices of attire*. We can be compassionate and curious about their decisions, helping them realize that they are, in fact, decisions. This means that we should abandon all mind-reading: "You're just wearing that for attention, aren't you?" Mind-reading is an attempt to think for other people. This also means asking questions about outfits we don't have a problem with. It means getting interested in our teenagers' fashion sense and engaging it as a significant part of their self-expression. It will be much easier to have a conversation about immodest clothing if it comes in the middle of a long-running and mostly positive conversation about clothing in general.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a confusing time. Our teenagers are experiencing body change, discovering their sexuality, defining their identity according to their peer-groups as well as their family, deciding what careers they'd like to pursue, engaging with the latest social media technologies, and on and on we could go. Almost all of these processes play a role in the choices our teens make about what they wear. It's no wonder that the results can be... unnerving.

Thankfully, Jesus knows the heart of humanity well enough to give us solid wisdom in approaching the issue of modesty. By framing the issue broadly, to open our eyes to the widespread immodesty of our culture, we can *join with* our teenagers on a journey toward Christlike secrecy in the Father's love and care. Beyond that, we can work alongside them as we seek to shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.

We're praying that God helps you and your teenager fathom the height and depth and breadth of the love the Father has for us, and that, by His grace, we all can begin to live for Him alone.

Recap

- Modesty is not just about women's clothing but is best defined as "humility in public."
- In our culture, attention is power. So *everyone* feels the need to show off.
- Our culture teaches women that physical attractiveness is the top priority in life.
- More specifically, it teaches women that their sexuality is their source of power. The more sexually forward they are, the more attention they will get, the more power they will receive.
- But this is a Satanic lie.
- We should not argue for modesty by saying that men are "visual creatures" and that women who dress provocatively will become "stumbling blocks" that make their brothers sin. This reasoning narrows the definition of modesty, dehumanizes young men, and over-sexualizes young women's bodies.
- Jesus is our first example in modest living. His teaching recorded in Matthew 6 is the best place to start constructing a theology of modesty.

- Jesus' main motivation for not showing off, the thing that freed Him from the need for human attention, was that He knew the Father's gaze was always lovingly on Him. We could all stand to remind ourselves of that.
- The classic modesty passage in 1 Timothy 2 encourages women to focus on their good deeds rather than their clothes. They have been saved for good works, not to waste their life and money on looking good.
- 1 Timothy 2 does not make protecting men from lust the motivation for dressing modestly.
- Paul also says that clothing should be respectable, or fitting for the situation, and chosen in a mindset of self-control, not from a desire to fit in. Paul wants women to realize that they have *choices* in what they wear.
- For people whose need for attention has been satisfied by their knowledge of the Father's love, looking good is a legitimate motivation for choosing to wear a certain garment.
- Moreover, in the modern world, fashion has become an artform and therefore a mission field. Therefore creativity in clothing is a gift that should be used for God's glory. Christian attire should engage our imagination. It shouldn't be boring.
- We can talk to our teenagers about modesty when we have created an overall culture of modesty in our households.
- It is important to constantly remind our teens that they are loved and seen by God. They do not need the approval of the world, and neither do we.
- We need to teach our families how hard the world is on women. This will help cultivate compassion for the women we know (or the women we are) in their struggle against the world's lies.
- We should have an ongoing, mostly positive discussion with our teens about their choices of attire.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Tattoos](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Body Positivity](#)

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Additional Resources

- "[I invented 'virtue signalling'. Now it's taking over the world](#)," James Bartholemew
- "[Films](#)," Jean Killbourne Website
- "[The Dangerous Ways Ads See Women](#)," Jean Killbourne
- "[Still Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women](#)," Jean Killbourne (full documentary)
- "[More Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny than Ever](#)," Ginia Bellafonte
- "[The Evolution of the Swimsuit](#)," Jessica Rey
- "[The Thing I Couldn't Stand about Modesty Talks](#)," Emily Wilson
- "[Beth Moore—Mean Girls](#)," Youtube
- "[CHRISTIAN MODESTY IS A MESS | MY STORY](#)," Ally Faber
- "[Does Modesty Apply to Men? A Holistic Approach](#)," Amy R. Buckley

- "[Yoga Pants and What the Bible Really Says about Modesty](#)," Amy R. Buckley
- "[Modesty Misunderstood: What Men and Women Need to Know](#)," Meggie Cottonethal (the theology in this article is particularly insightful).

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