

Dress for Success

By David Feddes

If you are trying to get a job, you need to wear the right clothes to the job interview. You need to dress for success. If the interviewer doesn't like your appearance, your other qualities may not count for much. Someone else will get the job. Some employers look harder at your shoes than at your list of accomplishments. I'm not kidding. If lots of applicants want the job, some interviewers weed out people based on shoes. They see scuffed shoes as a mark of carelessness, while well-polished shoes indicate a well-prepared person who is more likely to be thorough and project a good image to company clients.

There are various common sayings about clothing: "Clothes make the man." "You are what you wear." "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression." First impressions are so important that many books and websites offer guidelines on how to dress for success when you have job interviews.

Most experts offer similar advice. Almost all say that hair should be well-groomed, not messy. Almost all warn that if you dress too casually, many interviewers take it as a signal that you don't want the job badly enough or that you might be too casual and careless in your work. Almost all experts insist that you not have any visible tattoos or body piercings. As one adviser tells men, "If you have an earring or nosering, leave it at home unless you are auditioning for a rock band."

Women going to a job interview are advised not to get too fancy with their hair. They're also advised against buzz cuts that make them look like men. Women are told, "Go easy on the makeup." "Don't overdo perfume." "Limit your jewelry." Every adviser says that if women want to be taken seriously, they must avoid clothing that is sexually suggestive. "Low necklines and high hemlines" are out. Absolute no-nos include "mini-skirts, high heels, long or bright nails, garish makeup, low-cut or tight tops." Instead, advisers urge, "Button all the buttons on the blouse." "Never wear a skirt shorter than the knee." As one puts it, "Don't think that the workplace is a singles' bar."

This advice about dressing for success reminds me of a passage in the Bible. 1 Timothy 2:9-10 calls for "women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God." This Bible passage is often ignored or misunderstood or dismissed as old-fashioned. It's mocked as a silly attack on pretty hair, nice clothes, and feminine beauty. But if this Bible passage is so out of date and unhelpful, then why do so many modern experts make similar points on how to dress for success?

The Bible calls for clothing that is decent, not skimpy or suggestive. The Bible says to dress sensibly, without extravagant hairdos, without showy jewelry, without extreme expense. That's what the Bible says, and experts on dressing for success say similar things: dress decently and sensibly so that people won't look at you as a sex object or a showoff but can instead focus on who you are and what you're able to do.

There are major differences, of course, between the Bible's teaching and the experts' advice. The Bible guides us in how to dress for success in worshiping God, while the experts merely say how to dress for success in getting a job, impressing clients, and making money. God cares about modesty and good sense; he's not so

concerned whether your shoes are perfectly polished or whether you wear a certain kind of suit. Still, the Bible and the “dress for success” experts agree that clothing can send signals, and it’s important to send the right signal.

God doesn’t give us a detailed dress code in the Bible. He doesn’t require women to hide behind veils or to look as plain as possible. He doesn’t order men to wear a suit and tie at all times. In God’s eyes, character matters more than clothing. Whether you’re male or female, it’s more important to dress in good deeds than in a certain type of clothing. God says in the Bible, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Still, even though the inner person matters more than outward impressions, and even though the Bible doesn’t give a detailed dress code, Scripture does call for modesty in our clothing and appearance. That message is needed today even more than when it was first written.

Decency

Part of modesty is decency. Modesty is not indecent. It’s not sexually provocative. If you’re modest, you have a kind of shyness about sexuality, a discomfort with crude jokes and lewd stares. This doesn’t mean that you’re ashamed of your body or that you think sex is bad. If you’re modest, you may be good looking and may have a passionate love life in marriage, but there’s a strong sense that this passion is very precious, personal, and private. Nakedness may be lovely in the marriage bed but not as a public display.

Wendy Shalit wrote a book titled *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*. Wendy Shalit attended a college which prided itself on being progressive. The college wanted to make men and women the same, so the common bathrooms for each dormitory floor were open to both sexes. When Wendy Shalit objected to being in the same bathroom with men, she says, “I was told by my fellow students that I ‘must not be comfortable with [my] body.’ Frankly, I didn’t get that, because I was fine with my body; it was their bodies in such close proximity to mine that I wasn’t thrilled about.”

As Wendy Shalit was alarmed by widespread immodesty, she also noticed that there were still at least some people who wore very modest clothes. These people turned out to be some of the most radiantly romantic and happily married people. Meanwhile, immodest people who flaunted their bodies and hooked up in casual sexual encounters with various people turned out to be jaded and bored. They were less happy, less romantic, even less sexy. The truth is that modest people aren’t against sexuality; they value it too highly to throw it around. In Wendy Shalit’s words, “The more precious something is, the more it must conceal and protect itself.”

Decency is a sign of dignity. If you feel worthless, you’re more likely to hook up in casual sex with various people. But if you know the value of your body and of yourself as a person made in God’s image, you are more likely to be modest and decent in your clothing and conduct. You don’t need to make others drool at the sight of you to be worth something. In the Bible’s great love poem, Song of Songs, one lover says to another, “You are a garden locked up ... a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain” (4:12). Your body and sexuality are too precious to put on display and make available to just anybody. Modesty is your way to keep something precious “locked up,” “enclosed,” “sealed,” to keep it hidden and unspoiled for the exclusive delight of your spouse.

Huge numbers of people in our immodest culture just don't get it, and they choose to wear immodest clothing. Pastor and author Douglas Wilson says, "Many of the current fashions for young women appear to be apparel in standard use down at the local Hooker Training Academy." Some styles are so similar to prostitutes that Wilson's wife, Nancy, told him, "It must be difficult for men these days trying to figure out which ones they have to pay for and which ones are free." Even many church people dress indecently. As Wilson puts it, "Many Christian women go to worship today dressed in a manner that would have gotten them thrown out of a bar fifty years ago."

The problem of worshipers dressing like prostitutes has come up before. In Proverbs 7, the Old Testament speaks of a wife "dressed like a prostitute" who has just been at a place of worship. Her husband is out of town, and she uses her sex appeal to seduce a foolish young man into bed with her. This sexual encounter has a devastating, deadly impact.

The Bible clearly condemns such adultery. Sex is good and holy between a man and woman who are married to each other, but sex apart from marriage is sinful, and so is dressing in a sexually suggestive way when you're in public and not in a bedroom with your spouse. The woman in Proverbs 7 was a married, church-going woman, but she "dressed like a prostitute."

In our setting, dressing like a prostitute is more and more common. Why? Because many men and boys aren't wise enough to value modesty, and they foolishly fall for any female that puts her body on display. Some girls and women get their sense of worth from attracting males, so when they realize that all it takes to get men's attention is immodest clothing and some flirting, that's the approach they take. This isn't just sinful; it's stupid. Wise women know that if a man is worth having, he won't be the kind that chases every flirt in a short skirt. Wise men know that if a woman is worth having, she has enough modesty and dignity to save herself for the right man and not make herself an object for everybody to gawk at.

Corporations such as Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch specialize in immodesty and in getting people to dress like prostitutes. For many people, dressing like a prostitute simply means dressing like a favorite singer or movie star. It means displaying your body in such a way that makes others want you in bed and suggests that you might be willing. It can mean tight clothing that emphasizes every contour of your body. Dressing like a prostitute can mean necklines that drop too low and reveal too much. It can mean dresses or shorts that hide very little. It can mean pants that ride low and look like they could come off at any moment. It can mean swimsuits for men or women that hide less than a decent pair of underwear would hide.

Does Modesty Matter?

The Bible says to "dress modestly, with decency and propriety." Is this a standard you try to live by? If you don't follow Jesus or care what the Bible says, then all this talk about modesty may sound silly to you. Your motto may be, "If you've got it, flaunt it," and you think there must be more important things to discuss than modesty. I won't argue with you. In your case, there *is* something more important—your need for a relationship with God. Immodesty and sexual looseness are symptoms of a deeper problem—not being connected with God. You need to get right with God before you worry about anything else. If you're not a Christian and you want to focus on something

more important than modesty, then focus on how you can get to know Jesus as your Savior.

But what if you already know Jesus and believe the Bible as the Word of God? Let me ask you: Are you dressing for success in line with the Bible's teaching? I'm sure there are Christians reading this right now who think I'm making a big deal about nothing when I talk about dressing modestly. But if modesty didn't matter, God wouldn't talk about it in the Bible. A relationship with Christ is more important than clothing choices, true enough, but clothing choices send a signal about us and our relationship to the Lord. When the Bible calls for modest clothing, it says the clothing should be appropriate for those "who profess to worship God."

Some Christians really do love the Lord, but their clothing (or lack of clothing) sends the wrong signals. They are genuine Christians, but they are spiritually immature and unwise in how they dress. They may purposely want to show off their body and turn heads and stir up desire in members of the opposite sex. Others may not consciously try to do that; they just want to be in style—and they don't seem to notice that sometimes the latest style makes them look more like a prostitute than a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

What sort of clothing do you wear? What impact does your appearance have on others? If you haven't given this much thought before, please think about it now. When people look at you, does your clothing and appearance protect them from sinful thoughts and help them to take you seriously as a person who knows God? Or do you look like bed bait and tempt them to lust?

Melody Green has long been active in Christian outreach and has firsthand insight on this. She says,

Many Christians are either oblivious or uncaring about the effect they have on others. They may even appear to have a real excitement and love for the Lord—however, their body is sending out a totally different message. I know, because I have done it—partly in ignorance, but mostly in rebellion. I can remember thinking, "Well, it's not *my* fault if they can't keep their eyes off of me and on the Lord. *They* just aren't spiritual enough. Why should I have to change just because *they* are weak?"

But the Lord showed me that it *was* my fault. I was responsible for causing my brother to stumble and it had to change. Once I really saw the damage my selfishness was doing to others and to the Lord, I was really ashamed of myself and embarrassed that I had been representing Jesus in such an unbecoming way.

Modest clothing thoroughly covers what needs to be covered.

Gender-Appropriate

Along with decency, modesty includes propriety. For clothing to be proper, it must be gender-appropriate. If you're a boy or man, stay away from clothing, hairstyles, and jewelry that make you appear feminine. If you're a girl or woman, stay away from clothing that makes you look masculine. God created male and female, and he likes the difference. He doesn't want women to try to look more like men, or men to try to look more like women. He wants you to accept the way he made you, and he wants your gender to be evident in your appearance. When God gave his law to Moses, he said, "A

woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this" (Deuteronomy 22:5).

Clothing customs vary from culture to culture and from age to age. In Scotland, for example, rugged warriors have worn kilts (skirt-like garments), which were considered masculine. But in another culture, skirt-like clothing might be considered feminine, because men wear pants and only women wear skirts. The Bible doesn't give a detailed dress code on what's masculine or feminine. But we should be sensitive to what sort of clothing and grooming in our cultural setting would make us appear masculine or feminine.

From time to time, Nigerian Christians have asked me whether it's okay for women to wear trousers. If I had to give a short answer, I'd say, "Yes, it's okay for women to wear pants." If the pants are a feminine style and don't make a woman look like a man, and if the pants are modest and not too tight or revealing, then there's no biblical objection to women wearing trousers. Of course, if a woman prefers to avoid pants and wear only dresses and skirts in public, that's perfectly fine.

Some readers might think it odd and quaint for anyone to ask about women wearing pants. But give these Nigerian believers credit: at least they have a healthy concern for women to wear clothing that is feminine and not to be look-alikes of men. That's wiser than the gender blender approach that approves women in combat boots and brush cuts, and has no problem with cross-dressing men with lipstick, dresses, and jewelry. Whatever you think about whether or not women should wear trousers, please honor the basic principle that women dress like women and men like men. Don't wear clothes that would make someone wonder whether you're male or female. Propriety means a man looking properly masculine and a woman looking properly feminine.

No Extreme Expense

Another aspect of dressing with propriety is that your clothing be sensible and not cost a fortune. We've seen what 1 Timothy 2:9 says about costly hairdos, gold, pearls, and expensive clothes. People who profess to honor God and follow Jesus don't need such things in order to be valuable. It's fine to dress neatly and attractively and to be well groomed, but don't go overboard on expense.

How much is too much? The Bible isn't legalistic, and it doesn't set an exact price limit. God leaves much to the Holy Spirit's leading and to Christian freedom of conscience. But the basic principle is to avoid showiness and extreme expense. If your clothing and hair styling and jewelry cost enough to feed a poor family for a year, don't you think it's too much? If you use clothes and jewelry to show how successful and wealthy you are, aren't you being proud and insensitive to those who have less? The Bible commands the wealthy "not to be arrogant [but] to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:17-19). Would you rather spend your wealth on clothes and jewelry that tempt poor people to envy, or spend it on helping the needy?

It's no better to wear costly clothing that tempts others to envy than it is to wear skimpy clothing that tempts others to lust. It's no better to dress and act like money is everything than to dress and act like sex is everything. Both attitudes come from the sinful world, not from God (see 1 John 2:15-16).

Dress for success: spiritual success. Dress with propriety. Don't use clothing, grooming, and jewelry to display status, success, and superiority. Wealthy people should not dress to impress or intimidate, and the rest of us should not follow the worldly way of treating wealthy people better than we treat others. In James 2, the Bible says that if you meet someone "wearing a gold ring and fine clothes" and treat him better than "a poor man in shabby clothes," you have "discriminated" and have done "evil."

Rich people are important in the business world, but in the church, Jesus humbles them to the same level as everyone else. Poor people hold low positions in society, but in the church they are esteemed as precious persons for whom Jesus gave his life and who will someday rule with Jesus. In James 1, the Bible says, "The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position" (James 1:9-10). Take that attitude, and clothing won't become a competition.

None of this means that God wants us to dress in the cheapest, ugliest clothes we can find. In Proverbs 31, the Bible describes a truly valuable woman and concludes, "Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (v. 30). It says that such a woman "is clothed with strength and dignity" (v. 25). Now, if beauty matters less than being godly, and if the most important clothing is strength and dignity, does this woman pay no attention to clothes or personal grooming? Does she look homely and dress poorly? Not at all! "She is clothed in fine linen and purple," says the Bible. She wears fine fabric and beautiful colors without going overboard. The fact that her body is "clothed with fine linen and purple" fits well with the fact that her spirit "is clothed with strength and dignity."

Clothing sends signals. It can reveal how a person is doing on the inside. When someone feels depressed and worthless, she may react by dressing in the baggiest, ugliest clothes she can find. She may leave her hair tangled and unkempt, and do nothing to enhance her looks. Then again, she may deal with her sense of inadequacy by going to the opposite extreme. She piles on makeup, spends hundreds on hairstyling, and goes on shopping sprees for new clothes, all to make herself feel better. Both extremes are misguided efforts to deal with a hollow heart.

The Heart of the Matter

If you're dressing wrong, the clothing itself isn't the main problem; it's a signal of a deeper problem. Your main problem is a heart problem. Your heart is out of tune with God and in tune with a society that loves money, is confused about gender, and is shameless about sex. If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. You don't just need to change your clothing; you need God to change your heart. Instead of going along with the world, you and I need to be different from the world. Who knows—if we live by God's Word, we might even change the world! Meanwhile, whether you eventually change the world or not, first ask God to change your heart. Ask God to forgive your sins, put your trust in Jesus, and live for him.

When 1 Timothy 2:9 instructs women how to dress, it stresses character and conduct, not just clothing. This instruction is valuable for women and men alike. If you "profess to worship God" and know Jesus as your Savior, you have been bought by his blood. That's the price that God has paid for you, the value he has placed on you. You

are God's child, a son or daughter of the King of the universe. You belong to the royal family. You don't need to impress or seduce anybody in order to be valuable; you are God's treasured possession. If that reality is living in your heart, your body language and clothing will shine with the beauty of the Lord. Your clothing and grooming will accent and enhance your physical appearance, even as you know appearance isn't everything.

If God renews your heart and puts you in tune with his heart, it will affect how you dress. You'll know how precious your sexuality is, you'll enjoy the gender God created you to be, you'll know that money is not God's measure of value. You won't get sucked into worldly standards of grooming and apparel that are indecent, that blur gender, or that are too showy and expensive. You will dress modestly, with decency and propriety.

Do you care more about your heart or about your appearance? A man's real strength is not his appearance. A woman's real beauty is not her appearance. God prizes inner strength, inner beauty. He is not impressed when we depend on our physical shape or on clothing and jewelry to substitute for true strength and beauty. Character matters more than clothing. What you wear is not nearly as important as who you are.

Still, what you wear may say something about who you are. Whether you like it or not, clothing may say something about character. If you wear modest, decent clothing even though you're physically attractive, you send a signal that you're not just a sex object and that you're more eager to please God than to make people drool over you. If you wear clothing that is gender-appropriate even when gender blender styles are available, you send a signal that you appreciate the God-created distinction between male and female. If you wear moderately priced clothing even though you could afford more costly apparel, you send a signal that there's more to you than money and that you're more eager to spend money doing good than looking good. If you dress and groom yourself in a way that's both modest and attractive, you send a signal of humility and dignity as God's child.

Be slow to judge other people by their clothing, but be quick to examine what signals your own clothing sends. Clothing doesn't matter as much as character, but clothing does send signals about character. God obviously knows this, and that's why he gives us biblical directions on clothing. Use wisdom and good judgment in how you dress your body. And to dress for success in the most important sense, start with your heart. Dress yourself with Christ and his character. The Bible says, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience... And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:12,14). That is the very best clothing. Dress that way, and you will truly be a success.

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