

The Snare of Mere Outward Beauty

Proverbs 31:30; 1 Timothy 2:9

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There is a proverb of man that closely parallels Proverbs 31:30: "Beauty is only skin deep." And if ugliness of soul is below the outward beauty of the skin, even the outward beauty itself will appear more and more ugly to those who behold it. How many couples have been drawn to one another in marriage by a mere physical attraction to learn the misery of living with one who is very unattractive in the inner man? Similarly, a man or woman who is very plain or perhaps unattractive outwardly may become very beautiful by means of the godly character which is manifested in word and deed.

This, of course, is not to say that there is anything wrong with physical beauty or physical attraction. It is simply to say that when we weigh the beauty of one's inward appearance against the beauty of one's outward appearance, the inward far excels the outward (according to the Lord in passages like Proverbs 31:30). For it is not physical attraction that will bring peace and harmony into your family. It is not how handsome he is or how pretty she is that will lead a husband or a wife to serve one another at the expense of his/her own pleasures and desires. It is not mere outward beauty that will draw a couple closer to the Lord Jesus Christ.

How I plead with you, young adults, teens, and children, to look much more closely at the splendor of the inner sanctuary than at the glory of the outer temple. Of course, if you are one who is already cultivating that inner beauty of holiness within yourself, you will be looking for that same quality in a future spouse. But if you are one who is so fixed upon your own outward qualities that you take little or no thought of inward transformation by the grace of God, you will likely find a spouse just like yourself, which will lead to great heartache and sorrow. How many have gone to great expense to prepare themselves outwardly for that glorious wedding day, but have put so little time and effort into preparing themselves with love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, kindness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control (the fruit of the Holy Spirit as found in Galatians 5:22-23). Dear ones, today let us turn our attention to what the Lord tells us in regard to our adornment as we consider Proverbs 31:30. The main points from our text are these: (1) The Vanity of Mere Outward Beauty; (2) The Praise of True Inward Beauty.

I. The Vanity of Mere Outward Beauty.

A. Proverbs 31:30 are the words of King Lemuel's mother which she taught him as a faithful mother. This is the only place where such a king by this name appears in Scripture. Many scholars have speculated that Lemuel was a name given to Solomon by his mother (just as it was common for other biblical characters to have more than one name, such as Peter who was also called Simon). Even if this is the most plausible explanation, we cannot be certain. Lemuel means "devoted to God." And from Lemuel's youth, his mother taught him how he ought to rule (as we see in Proverbs 31:3-9) and how he ought to marry (as we find in Proverbs 31:10-31). Lemuel's mother used a memory scheme in Proverbs 31:10-31. For the first letter of each of these verses begins with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order (22 letters in all). It was an aid to a child's (or even an adult's) memory in applying his ABC's (as it were) to a clear picture of a virtuous woman. For thousands of years, this description of a virtuous woman has guided godly young men in their search for a virtuous wife, and has prepared godly young women in becoming a virtuous wife. Although these words may have been the words of a mother to a son, nevertheless, God inspired Solomon to include them in holy Scripture for our instruction as well.

B. Proverbs 31:30 is the conclusion of all that is said about the virtuous woman from the previous verses. Here is the summary of what it means to be a godly woman (as well as a godly man). For the truths

conveyed in this verse may be applied to women and to men as well. They are universal in their application rather than being gender specific. The context of Proverbs 31:30 may have women specifically in view, but herein are found moral qualities which should be embraced by men as well as by women.

C. Lemuel's mother first says in Proverbs 31:30, "Favor is deceitful."

1. Favor is the Hebrew word for "grace", but it can also refer to the outward charm and favor which makes one appealing to the general public. In this context it most likely refers to the outward refinement and manners one exhibits when in the society of others. In other words, here is one who has been properly taught how to conduct herself when in public with much charm. One who uses proper etiquette in public and has perhaps a magnetic (or superstar) personality. Lemuel's mother warns King Lemuel: "Mere outward charm is a deception and lie. Son, don't go after a woman who has only a superficial charm about her. For that charm will wear off very quickly once she is out of the spotlight of her fans who adore her." She who is the envy of many men in public is unlikely to be tied down very long to any one man in marriage. Of course, the same thing may be said of a charming man who sweeps the young lady off her feet. Beware of mere outward charm in such men.

a. Knowing that such "charming" men and women are out there, let them find a place in your heart and you are sunk. Here is another good reason for an extended courtship. For in an extended courtship, you are much more likely to get beyond the superficial to see what lies in the character of a woman or a man. Take your time in courtship and investigate the desires, the goals, the character, and the integrity of a man or a woman before taking that step toward engagement and marriage.

b. Furthermore, to look only at the outward charm of a person is to swallow a deception or a lie according to Lemuel's mother. You are not really seeing the true person. You are only seeing the outward facade of a house and not what it looks like on the inside. Wouldn't you consider it very risky to buy a house after only seeing its outward charm and appeal? The interior of the house may be in complete shambles. And if you would not buy even a house before carefully investigating the house's interior and foundation, why would you marry a person before carefully investigating the interior and foundation of that person?

2. It is interesting that the same Hebrew word translated here as "deception" is also used in Jeremiah 10:14-15 for the idol which a man makes and worships: "for his molten image is falsehood" (or is a deception). In what sense is the image a falsehood or a deception? It is a deception in the sense that it promises much, but delivers nothing of true value. Those who are deceived by the outward glory of the image and offer their prayers or worship to it, will be misled, disappointed, and betrayed. For it is not God. It is an absolute lie and those who believe that lie will suffer now and for all eternity. Only the one true living God revealed in Holy Scripture will not disappoint. Only He is faithful and true. All other gods which men erect in their lives (whether money, work, family, health, beauty, pleasure, music, sports, education) are a deception and lie which will bring upon men God's wrath and condemnation. Dear ones, are you trusting in a lie and a deception today? Have you convinced yourself that if you only had more money, better health, more freedom to do what you want to do, or if you were only more attractive outwardly you would be truly happy? If so, you have believed the lie of the devil. For only Christ can bring true joy, peace, contentment, and happiness. Only the God of your salvation delivers what He promises. Perhaps you need to repent today for having put your faith in some object (other than God) in order to make you truly happy. Beloved, as much of a blessing as is a beautiful wife or a handsome husband, neither of these blessings can make you truly happy. In what have you placed your faith to bring lasting peace and true contentment in life? The Apostle Paul declares: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

D. King Lemuel's mother not only says, "Favor is deceitful" but she continues in Proverbs 31:30 by saying, "and beauty is vain."

1. How our society worships physical beauty. The pictures of the beautiful idols which our society worships are plastered all over magazines, on television, and now on computers. As a result, there are people (young and old) “falling in love” and emotionally involved with these living, breathing idols whom they have never even met. On what basis do their hearts go after these stars? On the basis of their outward beauty because they certainly do not know them (no matter how many times they have read or seen interviews).

a. Dear ones, beauty is a good gift from God and there is nothing wrong with beauty in itself (whether it be beautiful people, beautiful mountains, beautiful cars, or beautiful music). And although our judgment of what is beautiful may vary to some degree from person to person, nevertheless, the aesthetic value of beauty is not to be depreciated or undervalued. For God Himself has given us beauty in this world to appreciate in order that we might worship the Creator of all such beauty (rather than the creature).

b. Many times God has caused his inspired writers to record in the pages of Holy Writ the fact that a person was physically attractive (whether Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, David, Abigail, Bathsheba, Absalom, or Esther). Had I lived at the time of these biblical characters, it would certainly not have been sinful for me to recognize and acknowledge their outward beauty since God Himself has stated this to be the case in His Word. Thus, it is not outward beauty that is wrong; for it is good and given by God. It is the abuse of outward beauty that is wrong. Outward beauty is wrong when it becomes an end in itself which we seek (whether in ourselves or others), or when it becomes a means to some end of filling the emptiness or void in our lives, or an end to becoming popular, or an end to becoming accepted, or an end to becoming successful, or an end to getting what we want in life, or an end to getting an attractive guy or girl.

c. Dear ones, whatever outward beauty you may have is not given to glorify yourself, but is given to glorify the Lord who gave it to you. Who do you want people to see above all when they look at you? Do you truly desire that they would see the God who has created you and redeemed you, or does that never even enter your mind? If it is not God you want others to see in your outward appearance, then it must be merely yourself that you want them to see, which I suggest is a form of idolatry in robbing God of His glory. You have cheated the Lord out of His praise.

2. In spite of this divine quality of created beauty which God has given to man, King Lemuel’s mother gives a necessary caveat or warning: “Outward beauty is vain.” Our text literally says, “beauty is a vapor.” It is transitory and changeable. Outward beauty is vanishing (whether gradually with age, or suddenly by some act of God’s providence). So when your love for another person is merely based upon his or her outward beauty, should that outward beauty be lost, your love will be lost as well. Upon what is your love for your husband or wife truly based? Could you honestly say that you would love and care for your spouse if he/she was seriously scarred in the face from a burn, or if he/she was seriously deformed in some part of the body due to the effects of cancer? You who are unmarried need to understand the true foundation of a lasting love in marriage. You may love the outward appearance of one whom you court (nothing wrong with that), but do not proceed to marriage if you do not love even more so the beauty of his/her character and soul. For the outward beauty of these mortal bodies is perishing (as we learn in Psalm 39:5).

3. Is physical adornment sinful? Is it a sin to use jewelry or cosmetics? Is caring for your physical body unlawful? No, I don’t believe it is sinful in itself to adorn the body with jewelry or cosmetics. As in all areas of life, it is not the use, but the abuse of such things that is sinful. Let me give you some reasons why it is not sinful.

a. The wearing of jewelry to beautify the body is not condemned in Scripture (Genesis 24:22; Exodus 32:3; Isaiah 61:10; Ezekiel 16:11; Luke 15:22). It is the abuse that is condemned (whether in excess or out of one’s means).

b. Neither is the caring for one’s body with fragrant oils and lotions to beautify it condemned in Scripture (Esther 2:12; Song of Solomon 4:10).

c. Since it is not sinful to beautify the body with jewelry or oils and lotions (as long as it is not abused), then I would also submit that it is not sinful to use cosmetics to beautify the body (if not

abused). Some have argued that since wicked Jezebel used cosmetics as we see in 2 Kings 9:30, it is therefore prohibited to all women lest they be like Jezebel. I simply cannot follow such an argument. For if painting her face (or actually her eyes) was sinful in itself, so was the next act (she “tired her head” that is adorned her head with headdress of some kind). Furthermore, we find in Jeremiah 4:30 and Ezekiel 23:40 that painting the eyes is again mentioned in conjunction with bathing, clothing oneself with crimson, and in wearing jewelry (to deck with jewelry merely means to adorn oneself with jewelry which as we have already seen is not forbidden by the Lord). Thus, if painting the eyes is sinful, so is taking a bath or wearing jewelry (but neither bathing nor wearing jewelry are sinful in themselves). Just as one can look like a harlot by the makeup one uses, so one can look like a harlot by the clothes that one wears. That, however, does not condemn clothes nor does it condemn cosmetics. It only condemns the abuse of both.

d. I agree with Calvin and many other Reformed commentators that what is condemned in 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3 is not jewelry, fine clothing, or cosmetics, but the abuse wherein is exhibited an “excessive eagerness and desire to be richly dressed” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 1 Timothy 2:9). It is to dress beyond one’s means and for the mere show of it. For Calvin rightly states:

And hence we ought to derive the rule of moderation; for, since dress is an indifferent matter, (as all outward matters are,) it is difficult to assign a fixed limit, how far we ought to go. . . . This at least will be settled beyond all controversy, that every thing in dress which is not in accordance with modesty and sobriety must be disapproved (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, 1 Timothy 2:9).

e. What are some guidelines we might use in adorning our bodies?

(1) Adorn your bodies to the glory of God first and foremost (1 Corinthians 10:31). Do not dress (as your chief end) in order to impress others. Is God’s glory a consideration at all in the clothing, jewelry, or cosmetics you use? Not to do so is robbing God of His glory. Your body and spirit belong to the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:20).

(2) Adorn your bodies moderately. In other words, do not go to extremes in fashions and fads (as we see in the “strange apparel” of Zephaniah 1:8). Don’t dress just to look like this rock star or that movie star. Remember those whom you want to be like and those whom you want to look like reveal much about the desires of your own heart.

(3) Adorn your bodies modestly. Clothing that is revealing or is tight so that every contour of the body is revealed is immodest. This is not adornment to God’s glory but to man’s glory. Such form fitted clothing reveals to others what a shapely body one has (or does not have). It becomes a stumbling block to others who gaze upon the form of the body and lust after it. Dear ones, lust in mankind does not need any help at all. Your clothing should cause people not to be distracted to specific parts of the body. Although you can ultimately not prevent someone else from lusting, you should not induce it by the way you dress. Also, modesty implies avoiding excesses (whether in jewelry, clothing, or cosmetics). Too much of any good thing is not modest. Paul says with regard to clothing in women (and this should also be applied to men as well): “In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel” (1 Timothy 2:9). I would also submit that one can dress in an excessive manner by either dressing too liberally or too conservatively. I do not think it is necessarily modest dress to return to the style of a former age (if that is modesty then I suggest all men and women return to wearing the robes of Christ’s time). One may draw just as much attention to oneself by such outdated conservative dress as if one were dressing according to the most recent fad. The whole idea should be to dress in such a way that you are not drawing attention to yourself.

(4) Adorn yourself with godly stewardship—in both finances and time. Don’t buy what you cannot afford just to impress others. Again the Apostle Paul declares that you should not adorn yourself with “costly array” (1 Timothy 2:9). However, at times it may be better stewardship to buy something

that costs more but may last longer. In other words, it may be a better use of financial resources in the long run to buy that which of a significantly superior quality (even if it is more expensive) than to buy that which is clearly of an inferior quality (even though it is less expensive). But also don't spend more time in adorning the body than you do in adorning the soul. Take time to be holy.

(5) Adorn yourself for your health. In other words, wear appropriate clothing for that particular season of the year. If it is cold outside, don't go around in a tee shirt just to look cool. Or if it is hot outside, don't go around in a sweater just to impress others. Keep yourself and your clothing clean.

II. The Praise of True Inward Beauty.

A. The mother of King Lemuel closes by saying, "but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised."

1. That beauty for which you should look in one you would seek to marry is the inward beauty of the fear of the Lord. One who fears the Lord takes God and his/her faith seriously. One who fears the Lord shows reverence for the Lord in his/her words, desires, goals, and deeds. One who not only professes the truth with the mouth, but has an evident love for the truth (whether the gospel of salvation, or the distinctives in our subordinate standards).

2. Here is a beauty that is not deceitful nor a vapor. Here is a beauty that endures forever. A beauty that promotes love for God, love for the brethren, love for the truth, and love for holiness.

B. Note what God says is beautiful in the Bible (and I would submit far more beautiful than the mere outward appearances of people): the Lord Himself is supremely beautiful in Psalm 27:4; holiness is beautiful in Psalm 29:2; the Church of Christ is beautiful as represented by the king's daughter in Psalm 45:11; and Christ's ministers are beautiful in their work of ministry and proclamation of the gospel in Exodus 28:2,40; Romans 10:15.

1. Dear ones, do you in fact find the Lord (and what he calls beautiful) more beautiful than the mere outward appearance of people? If not, you have a perverted and sinful view of true beauty. Perhaps that is the case because you are merely going through the motions of an outward religion.

2. You see, those who are so fixed upon that which is external (as in external beauty) would also be more likely to be more fixed upon the mere outward aspects of worship rather than upon the inward sincerity of worship. This is hypocrisy at its heart, dear ones. Come to the Lord today through Jesus Christ and learn what true beauty is—a beauty that will never fade nor diminish. Find true beauty in the Lord.

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