

## A Conversation About Modesty or “Oh my goodness...that girl forgot to put on a dress!”

We turn to another related (and uncomfortable) topic, but one that is necessary in the conversation regarding **PIL**.<sup>1</sup> And that is modesty.

### Immodesty on Full Display

In previous newsletters we have talked about the degradation of standards and morality. *Nothing exemplifies this more than in the way people dress.* Pastors see this as much as anyone, viewing ladies in worship, coming to the Lord’s Table, wearing low-cut tops and short, short(!) skirts. “Don’t look down! Don’t look down!” we say to ourselves as we distribute the Supper. Even “respectable” people dress immodestly it seems. And we all put up with it readily enough.

While I don’t intend to litigate the history of dress in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, to make my point, I only need mention one article of clothing—*leggings*. Known by a number of names (yoga pants, running tights, spandex), leggings in some form have been around for centuries as inner or under wear. But in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, leggings became accepted as *outerwear*. I remember the first time I saw a young lady wearing leggings in public *without* any kind of tunic top or dress (and not in the context of exercise).<sup>2</sup> I was working at Barnes and Noble one evening, when I spotted a college student wearing light-colored leggings with nothing to cover the “unmentionable” areas of her body. She was browsing books in the front of the store. My first reaction was, “Oh my goodness, that young lady forgot to put on her dress!” I was stunned. Should I say something? I didn’t want to embarrass her. And then it dawned on me...**she intended to go out in public dressed this way!** My next reaction was (as I kept staring at her), “There is nothing left to the imagination!” Next it was, “Turn away! Stop looking at that woman’s body!” But truth be told, it was hard not to stare.

Gradually women have become more and more comfortable wearing clothing that is form-fitting, tight, and revealing. Society has also become more accepting. Developments in the “modification of behavior” happen slowly, only to be punctuated by sudden, rapid advancements forward. Or in other words—drip, drip...BAM!...drip, drip, drip...BAM! Leggings-as-outerwear is a “BAM” phenomenon. Things are going along, steadily getting worse, but then...hyperdrive.

Not for the first time, the “prude” slur springs from your lips. “Why can’t you let people wear what they want without judging them? Besides, if you don’t like it, that’s your problem!” *Who made you the fashion police, Pastor Heaton?* We get a little touchy when anyone critiques behavior, don’t we? But I don’t do so to make myself seem superior. I am attempting to

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<sup>1</sup> This article returns to what was written about in the July and August newsletters. **PIL** stands for *porneia*, general immorality, and licentiousness.

<sup>2</sup> It was noted by a colleague that leggings-as-outerwear actually came about with Olivia Newton John and her 1982 song “Physical”. He might have a point.

comment on things that have gotten so far away from what God desires that we have stopped paying attention.

### **Modesty Is...**

So, let's start with being clear about what modesty is—**it is an attribute of beauty** and a God-pleasing **virtue**. Modesty is part of **God's teaching in the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment**. To be *modest in dress* is to protect beauty by covering the human body God created (especially women's) from eyes of people (especially from men) God has not given them over to. *Modesty is a blessing that enables one to present themselves to the world in a way that does not cause offense, sin, or lust...*and in this, modesty actually *accentuates a woman's beauty*.<sup>3</sup> Modesty is a gift of God, especially to women. For most of antiquity in Western societies, modesty conformed to some sort of higher standard. There was the “vulgar” and the expectation to not be “crass” or “immodest”. But that's long gone. With the erosion of all agreed-upon standards of behavior, modesty has left the building.

### **Immodesty Is...**

And let's be even more clear: **immodesty promotes sin that leads to sin**. To put it another way—*sinful males are going to stare*. Men will objectify a woman in immodest poses, situations, and dress. Even Christians! I am writing to those who believe in Christ, who are forgiven in Christ, and presumably believe that God sets the standard for all human behavior. I appeal not just to a bible verse, *but a way of life that followers of Christ are called to walk in*. But I am also writing to sinners. All of us. However, when a woman is immodest, it is not a “singular” sin that affects no one else. When a woman wears shorts with a saying printed across the rear, more people than just that woman are involved. Men will “read the slogan”.

It may seem that I'm picking on women. I will turn to the man's role in modesty in a moment. It's simply that women, as the more vulnerable sex,<sup>4</sup> put themselves in potentially dangerous situations through the practice of immodesty. As I stated, men are all too happy to leer. The signal sent to the sin-saturated male brain by a woman in immodest attire is “stare at me.” And then, it can and does lead to other things. Sometimes with tragic outcomes. But the argument from a view of *radical autonomy*<sup>5</sup> says, “It's my right to dress however I want! If *you* have a problem with the way I dress, then look the other way!” But to put the onus *solely* on the man to “look away” is ignoring *the gift of modesty*. Men *should* look away. But women are to “cover up”. And men are to help women in this task by “not looking”. *But*. Women who dress in tight fitting or revealing clothing **are saying the wrong things to the world at large**. Five minutes ago, this was commonly understood. No one would have disagreed.

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<sup>3</sup> There is even call to be modest in marriage. Perhaps a topic for another day.

<sup>4</sup> I actually mean to write that! Vulnerability is NOT a diminishment of a woman's worth, dignity or value. See 1 Peter 3:7.

<sup>5</sup> This is a fancy way of saying, “my truth” or “you do you”.

Modesty (like the word prude) has fallen out of favor, even within congregational churches. Just as Christians ape the culture in books, music, and movies, **they do so with clothing**. Folks, the culture is far gone. And it's never going to swing back to modesty. So, *we have to address it*.

### **S\*\*\* Shaming**

But I return for a moment to my initial example. I was curious exactly when leggings became outerwear. Knowing this might reveal something about my topic. So, I looked on Wikipedia. I found a sub-heading on the page listed as: "Used as Outerwear". Bingo! But I was astonished at what I found. The listing made a startling set of assertions. I provide a quote arguing for the girl's *right to dress however she wants*:

"Restrictions on wearing leggings is sometimes linked to 'slut-shaming' or 'body shaming', with critics noting that, '...not being able to wear leggings because it's 'too distracting for boys,' is giving the impression we should be guilty for what guys do'".<sup>6</sup>

What is "slut-shaming"? That's a thing? Is being "a slut" a modern "virtue" that I missed in catechism class? Some rabbit holes are best left unexplored. But what the entry shows is how **truly perverted** (upside down and twisted) **our modern notions have become**. The argument made is that restricting revealing dress is a threat...**to people who want the freedom to act as wickedly as possible!** Consider it from this perspective—the way one dresses is a *window* into who they are and whose they are. Either we behave as God's sons and daughters, or as slaves to perverse cultural forces that dictate "fashion" and "popularity". So, many people condemn what is good and endorse what is wicked...and the rest go along without batting an eye. Sometimes, it seems like Satan is winning.

### **The Natural Instinct Overridden**

However, modesty is actually *a natural inclination* implanted in every young lady by her Creator. Modesty is a good and proper instinct, especially as girls go through puberty and beyond. Modesty *preserves decorum* and helps to *escape from shame*.<sup>7</sup> As we see above, little girls are fed messages of immodesty from the time they can walk. The messaging to children comes from a highly sexualized culture that is *trying to normalize something that goes against that natural inclination*. Over time, this good natural instinct gets overridden. Stores and online shops sell almost exclusively immodest clothing (to say the least) for kids. Mothers and grandmothers buy these clothes or dress their children in the "ways of the world". Think of the whole "child beauty pageant" scene! Gross!

This overriding of the good instinct goes beyond just clothing. Currents of thought in society (found in curricula in public education) demand that young teen women have to learn to be

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, entry on "Leggings", <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leggings>. Accessed on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022. The quote is from a piece in Time magazine entitled "When Enforcing School Dress Codes Turn into Slut Shaming".

<sup>7</sup> We see this in the aftermath of the very first sin, as God "covered up" Adam and Eve in their nakedness.

“comfortable with their body”. What does *that* mean? Comfortable to reveal it to the public at any time and place? Comfortable with everyone staring at them? Comfortable in sending the exact *wrong message* to anyone within eye sight? Or comfortable to engage in what follows from immodest dress—gross and base behavior? Society “shames” women out of modesty by saying they have “hang ups” about how they dress and act. And now we have *generational* immodesty, handed down from mothers to daughters. Who buys the tight-fitting clothes for the teenage girl, after all? Who allows the girls dressed provocatively out of the house? In what ways is immodesty modeled even in the home? How does the girl see the mother dress (and behave)?

### **The Role of the Father in Modesty**

This is where fathers have to share some of the blame...and *most of the responsibility*. The father knows firsthand how men think. They know how *they* view a woman in immodest clothing. So, a father is to train his sons in being “modest” themselves. They must also teach them how to protect a woman’s modesty. More on that below. But what if the father has a daughter? Also *responsible*. This might responsibility often gets punted to mothers. But the father is perhaps **the only male in the entire world who will look at their daughter with eyes of love**. So, he is responsible for viewing what a daughter wears and then is responsible for telling his wife if there is “a problem.” Frankly, the mother might not see it. *But dad does*. If he puts himself in the God-given role of protector, then he can see the potential pitfalls. This might even stray into the realm of the “uncomfortable”...but too much is at stake. Fathers need to be involved in the “clothing conversation”. Roman Catholic author and blogger Leila Lawler, with respect to choosing appropriate swimwear for teenage daughters, puts it this way:

Have your teenage daughter bend over wearing her current swimsuit in front of your husband, if you are having doubts — make him observe. [Edited to say that she does not have to aware of his observation — but I stand by my insistence that he must observe her. He is the only man on earth who has only her goodness at heart, unlike all the men at the beach who have already observed her...] I think then you will have all the support you need. I hope so. This really is a hill to die on.<sup>8</sup>

This might shock you...that a father would “look at his baby” in such a way. But what is happening when our daughters dress immodestly (perhaps innocently enough)? Do you think the other men out there are “averting their eyes”? Do you think when I saw that young woman with the pale-covered leggings I immediately looked away?

### **What Does the Bible Say...?**

In case you think I speak from some personal crusade of prudery, I assure you that modesty is a thoroughly biblical idea and concept:

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<sup>8</sup> Leila Lawler, “Emergency Summer Reading: the Gift of Modesty,” Like Mother, Like Daughter Blog, entry posted July 30, 2022, <http://likemotherlikedughter.org/2022/07/emergency-summer-reading-the-gift-of-modesty/>.

*[I desire] 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.<sup>9</sup>*

And just so you don't think St. Paul is the only apostle concerned about modesty in the New Testament, St. Peter writes this in his first epistle:

*Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.<sup>10</sup>*

More than “proof texts”, the above show us that modesty is rooted in God's good order and design. It fits within His plan for men and women. *It restricts in order to promote.* But promote what?

It may seem that modesty is only about “managing negative behavior.” But it's more than that. There is also a positive aspect—**modesty has the ability to uphold a woman's value and worth, and indeed her beauty in the eyes of men and society.** Wearing leggings-as-outerwear doesn't liberate women, it makes them slaves to the desires of men. It doesn't empower women, but makes them *more vulnerable*. Modesty is God's gift to women to protect their worth and dignity in a fallen world. And modesty has a *fierceness* to it. It says, “You may not look! You may not ogle. That is for another...someday. But not for you!” Modesty precludes a man from looking on parts of the body reserved only for a “one day” husband. Modesty puts the woman in charge of who she will one day give herself to...willingly, lovingly in the beautiful union of marriage. Modesty doesn't make a woman less...it elevates them beyond a mere object of desire on display. Modesty promotes a woman's dignity, it promotes marriage, and it promotes a woman's beauty.

### **The Modesty of the Man and His Duty**

What about the man? Is he not to be “modest”? Of course. There is no double standard. He is never to go around in a state of undress.<sup>11</sup> But a man's part in modesty is rooted more in his call to **honor and duty**. He is to show *discretion and at all times protect a woman's reputation*. We talked of this above with respect to fathers. Remember the example about the father and the swimsuit? That's the picture, except it can extend out into society. A woman's modesty helps the man act honorably. But it's *reciprocal*. A man's sense of modesty is to uphold a woman in the eyes of the world. He is to “defend a woman's honor”. A man's modesty is less about “covering up” and *more about stepping up*. He not only looks away, training himself in this practice, but also discourages others from taking advantage of a woman, even if she is being immodest

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Timothy 2:9-10.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 3:3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Besides, women don't want to see “that” anyway!

herself. Man's duty is to be responsible for his behavior and to maintain and protect a woman's dignity—in all things.

What does this look like? What are some practical ways a gentlemen can be a gentlemen? Very basic. *Look at woman's eyes when speaking to them.* Women know when you are not...and when you are looking elsewhere. Be conscious of this and develop the practice of "training the eyes." Also, don't presume to enter into a conversation with a woman you don't know if she hasn't given permission. It used to be a man would never greet a woman unless first given a signal of permission (a smile or nod)...and even then it was a "hat tip". We are way beyond that now! But men can still be **deferential and take cues from a woman before approaching them.** And if a woman is in a state of immodest dress? Then do your best to avoid temptation. Be polite and kind, but dis-engage. This isn't rocket science. It just takes a bit of courage to do the right thing and go against the societal norms. It used to be called chivalry.

But perhaps...there is another aspect. There may be situations where a man *might* "say something". Not to embarrass, but to encourage and promote something good. It depends on our relationship with the particular person, but a quiet word to encourage someone to wear more appropriate clothing might be needed. And if other men are staring at a woman...men might even need to *interfere*. Say something. Do something. Don't let men take advantage of women. Do we just keep our heads down and let wickedness happen? May it not be so!

I realize that to some of you this might seem incredibly...what's the word...**sexist**. "Pastor Heaton is a big ole' sexist." I assure you, I write out of a sense of pastoral obligation and kindness. But perhaps it's time that we examine some of the old tropes like "sexist" and "chauvinist" and "misogyny". Maybe the way we've been carrying on and labeling men isn't for the best. Those of you that find me "sexist", I ask, "What am I seeking to uphold and what are you seeking to defend?" And just what is "sexist" anyway? If it means that *I believe in the biological distinction between male and female, that both sexes are equal in dignity and value but have different roles and responsibilities, and that God's good order and design are to be upheld in the Church...*then, yeah. Call me a "sexist".

### **The Big Picture in Modesty**

Sometimes it gets confusing. How do I know what to do and when to do it? What is a good *overall standard*, even with respect to how we dress and behave? The standard is "whatever". We might put it this way for **both sexes with respect to all behavior**—*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable...if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things,*

*and the God of peace will be with you.*<sup>12</sup> **Whatever you do...do the thing that upholds goodness, truth and beauty** and be at peace with our Creator. It's not rocket science.

### **Final Word: Tying It In**

So what does modesty and dress have to do with other issues, such as pornography? Do I have to make the connections?<sup>13</sup> Fine...I guess I must. Remember the narrower topic of pornography is situated within the larger domain of **PIL**—*porneia*, general **Immorality and Licentiousness**. The weakening of publicly-agreed-upon standards of dress is **both** a symptom of a lack of morality and a **cause** of the hyper-sexualization we see with men and women, starting as young teens. Girls dress provocatively, because that's what most teenagers are encouraged to do by the culture. It's what they see on social media. Instagram and TikTok are especially vile in this regard. Teens will also tend to push boundaries. They will look to see how far they can go. And many parents let it happen...because they **both** abdicate responsibility **and** are knee-deep in their own hyper-sexualized lifestyles (including the viewing pornography). But the unveiling of the "female form" is a dog whistle to any lustful male. Both are at fault and both (the immodest dresser and the one who leers) are accountable. Obviously, pornography takes things several steps further. So, another way of looking at this whole thing is—pornography *has no place for modesty*. And modesty has no place for sexual immorality of any kind. An obvious point. For if women and men strove to be modest, there would be very little porn.

Immodesty, especially in dress, is just one among many ways God's creation has abandoned His will regarding sexuality and interaction between men and women. But, as we shall see, this is not a new event and is a piece of a larger puzzle.

*(Next month's article talks about how the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is an allegory for our time to help us understand what we face)*

### **A Final, Final Word: Appropriateness**

Talking of modesty in dress also raises the question: *what about the allowance for standards in dress to change without it being considered immodest?* In other words, at one time it was thought immodest for a woman to show her shoulder or wear shorts. So what about now? May a woman dress fashionably and still be modest? Yes...to a point. And here's why. The lost companion alongside modesty is **appropriateness**.

What is appropriate? Who decides? This is difficult to pin down...but appropriateness has to do as much **with the setting** as modesty has to do **with the behavior**. Appropriateness looks at *what is going on* at the same time as *where is it happening*. Appropriateness is what is deemed suitable, taking into account the surroundings and the people involved. An example. A young girl wants to go for a run. She might wear a pair of running shorts (that are modest). But that

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 4:8-9.

<sup>13</sup> This article is a piece of a larger work on pornography in the Church.

same girl *may not* wear those running shorts to church or to the prom or the dentist. “Flag on the play!” you cry. “She should be able to wear them wherever she wants!” No, *she shouldn’t*. Because what is appropriate considers the setting. It seeks to “find a fit” with *what normally occurs* and *what is expected*. Another example. Let’s say a woman wants to take yoga at the local YMCA. It is not a “co-ed” class. It is taught by a woman for women. It has been “stripped” of its Eastern religious overtones and connections, and is essentially an exercise class to improve fitness, flexibility and core strength. May she wear yoga pants? Sure...with a caveat. Is she modest in her behavior? Is she at any time in view of males (who might be working out nearby)? Are the yoga pants absolutely too form-fitting? Who decides? Many considerations. But what is appropriate is an important part of this conversation.

Another example. Even more specific. Let’s say you are a swimmer, one who does so *for exercise*. You swim every day at the local indoor pool. Do you wear a swimming suit? Of course. A proper swim suit allows you to exercise efficiently. Might there be some more “modest options”? Always to be considered. But you would wear *an appropriate swimming suit that would help you function properly while swimming laps*. So, you get out of the pool. Do you go from there, dry off, get in your car and go home? Of course not. Now most of you can see the point. You would have a towel nearby, cover up with a robe or “swim cover”, go to the locker room and get changed. **The modesty conversation must include appropriateness. And what is appropriate always takes into account what is modest.**