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## DYSMORPHIC AND DANGEROUS: FEMALE BODY IMAGE IN A WORLD OF DISORDERED MIRRORS

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“She’s five foot *wide*,” a kid in the campground pool shouted out in jest; he was countering eleven-year-old me who had just shared that I was only five foot *tall*. The comment stung a little as my chunky physique produced self-consciousness in my insecure adolescent heart, but it was *just* a joke, and no big deal. Right? Yet years later, I still remember how I ducked under water to hide my tears. Today I can still recall feeling shame and, of course, ugly. Maybe it *was* a big deal.

My adolescent body was chubby and, though only fifteen pounds heavier than my petite friends, my weight put me in “Pretty Plus” sizes. I felt blobby and ugly. However, I had my naturally curly hair going for me, and no-cost ringlets brought attention from others. From friends to strangers to hair stylists, my curls were frequently praised, and more than a few told me they were jealous. I have to admit, it felt great!

Unexpectedly, as I got older, my body image woes and joys reversed themselves. I began to “grow into” my body. A friend’s recent Facebook post said she was “60 years old and finally comfortable in a swimsuit on the beach!” I too now feel at home in my own skin. Today my body is an infrequent distraction.

However, I realized in my forties that a bad hair day could trigger feelings of insecurity, lack of confidence, and...feeling ugly. A frizzy head of hair sent my self-esteem spiraling. Somehow my feelings about my hair had become deeply attached to how I felt about myself! Foolishness? To some degree, yes. Unusual? Absolutely not! Female body-image struggles are a global phenomenon.

## TWO ACCEPTED THOUGHTS IN A DYSMORPHIC WORLD

Two things related to female body image are agreed on in most spheres of society. The first is that most females struggle, *at least mildly at some point* in their lives, with disliking an aspect of their appearance. For some it's severe, as females<sup>1</sup> of all ages manifest symptoms of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). BDD is a mental state of being obsessed with flaws (minor or perceived) in one's appearance. The Mayo Clinic describes some of the symptoms as:

- Preoccupation with physical appearance with extreme self-consciousness
- Frequent examination of yourself in the mirror or the avoidance of mirrors altogether
- Strong belief that you have a defect in your appearance that makes you ugly
- Belief that others take special notice of your appearance in a negative way
- Avoidance of social situations
- Frequent cosmetic procedures with little satisfaction<sup>2</sup>

Consider the disturbing trend in recent years of "Am I Pretty or Ugly?" videos posted on YouTube by young girls, *little girls*. These heart-breaking video selfies are uploaded to an unknown audience begging for feedback regarding prettiness or ugliness. Many videos include the girls saying, "Be honest, I can handle it." It was personally painful to watch several and to read the begged-for comments, many of which were horrifically mean-spirited. Indeed, BDD would lead someone not only to be obsessed with looking in a mirror, but looking to the world of social media for a sense of beauty and worth. This trend is dysmorphic, or *not formed correctly*.

The *Dove Beauty Campaign* revealed that our self-perceptions are often harsh, and distorted from the way others see us. This study involved a professional sketch artist hired to draw women as they described themselves while unseen by the artist. He then drew a second image based on how *others* described the woman's appearance. The social experiment revealed that women's self-perceptions were often radically different from how others view them. Self-perceptions had developed dysmorphically, or *misshapen from reality*. The YouTube video showing the sketching process has been viewed close to sixty-five million times!<sup>3</sup> A chord was struck.

The second widely accepted thought is that female body angst is significantly influenced by images portrayed in the entertainment industry, as well as the fields of

fashion and beauty. A decade ago, when *The Dove Real Beauty Campaign* began, a global survey was launched among twelve nations, with thirty-two hundred respondents. Regarding beauty as defined by mass media and pop culture, the report said, “From Brazil to the Netherlands to Argentina—across cultures, ages, ethnicities and race—women make it clear they believe there is a one-dimensional and narrow, physical definition of beauty. The findings show that the ideas of beauty and physical attractiveness are largely synonymous, and although both are highly valued by society, both are rendered almost impossible to attain.”<sup>4</sup>

Celebrity and fashionista Joan Rivers, who died September 4, 2014, lived and worked in a business of good looks that believed the ultimate foolishness was to lose those good looks. Rivers acknowledged she was addicted to plastic surgery, joking that, “‘Every weekend I just go in and I do something. I get a tenth one free. It’s a little like coffee...you just keep going.’ Rivers admitted to having over 700 plastic surgery procedures during her lifetime including a plethora of [cosmetic procedures].”<sup>5</sup>

Surely there must be a better way to attain a positive sense of self, including beauty and worth, other than uploading selfies to strangers or paying for one more surgical procedure.

## THE BIBLE’S GUIDE TO REMAKING DISORDERED IMAGE

The BDD symptom list has a commonality, and it is a preoccupation with self. It makes sense for someone who desires to develop a positive *self*-image, to focus on *herself* or *himself*. And *to grow into* a more positive sense of self, including body image, it’s necessary to have an achievable goal. This is the kicker, as the global survey revealed: the world’s values are *impossible* to attain. Joan Rivers never reached a place of satisfaction with her appearance, even after hundreds of surgeries and investing in the best beauty products money can buy.

The Bible teaches that our sense of value and beauty in this life isn’t found in our “outer man,” or body. “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:18).<sup>6</sup>

Our inner being, which the Bible defines as our true self, is the eternal part of who we are. It is from our inner being that true beauty shines. The internal is meant to impact the way we regard and treat our external selves. This, when understood through the person of Jesus Christ, gives more hope than the futile attempts of an external radical makeover. How so?

God’s word continually points us *away* from self, and toward Him. This radical vertical reorientation away from the supposed value-affirming mirrors and beauty-

defining voices of the world leads us to hear and believe what He says about us. Actual mirrors, as well as the “word mirrors” that reflect how other people see us, often communicate distorted messages that miss God’s truth. As our Creator, He made us in His image of true beauty and value, yet we live our lives on this earth in vessels that are weak, aging, and imperfect. Each human body, including its physical appearance, has flaws. This is why it’s often said of those who have had multiple cosmetic surgeries with the hopes of having a “perfect” appearance, “He/she looks unnatural...not human anymore.”

Being oriented toward God, away from self, frees us from the disordered views of the world concerning beauty and worth. Consider how 2 Corinthians 4:7 describes God’s people as jars of clay, yet filled with a beautiful treasure: Christ! Clay pots are dusty, fragile, easily cracked, and in New Testament times weren’t valued for their appearance. As we live on this earth, we each have struggles, weaknesses, and imperfections; yet these imperfections allow the treasure within us, the eternal life of Jesus, to shine all the more brightly. Christ brings value and meaning to us, yet we so often want it the other way around. In addressing body image struggles, Julie Lowe of the Christian Counseling and Educational foundation said, “Any time someone tries to be perfect or be the most attractive, the external adorning gets in the way of the gospel (1 Peter 3:3).”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Savior, was prophesied about as one who would live on earth having “no stately form or majesty that we should look upon him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to him” (Isa. 53:2). What a contrast to what the world chases after. We don’t know how Jesus looked physically; no sketches were made, nor are there any detailed descriptions of His physical features except in Isaiah 53, which goes on in verse 3 to say that He was “like one from whom men hide their face, he was despised, and we did not esteem him.”

Isaiah’s point is not that Jesus was plain looking or a physically unattractive man. The Bible teaches that the beauty of Jesus, which is ours through relationship with Him, was in His obedience and holiness. God, in His glory, is beautiful and worthy of worship. As those created in His image, we grow into people free from the mirrors of the world to define our worth. Like David, we grow into image-bearing beauty as people who proclaim, “One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to meditate in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

## **TREAT THE SYMPTOMS OR TRANSFORM YOUR MIND**

God gently and patiently rescues us from our angst and body image struggles, as our thoughts are transformed. This transformation is not easy in a world of “cracked” mirrors, seductive voices, and media images that seek to persuade us with false ideas about what we should look like if we want to belong in the category of women who are beautiful, valued, and worthy of esteem. Yet, we can grow into David’s mindset: desiring to revel in the Lord’s beauty rather than self-preoccupation.

The Mayo Clinic offers suggestions for treatment of BDD.<sup>8</sup> Their path of recovery depends on things like avoiding anxiety-producing social situations, keeping appointments with therapists, faithful adherence to medications, and writing in a journal. These steps may *temporarily* remedy the emotional and mental anguish of women who despise and are obsessed with their physical features. The Bible goes deeper with its solution, speaking to our inner person and our eternal value as being tied to the value and worth of Jesus.

What is our purpose as those created by God, for God, in His image? We are to reflect him to the world as the glorious one, the one who makes all things new and who reveals the treasure of who He is through weak and imperfect people who love and obey Him. Instead of getting stuck in a hopeless cycle that aims at altering our imperfections, we can turn to God away from self. Instead of trying to rescue ourselves from the world’s opinions and demands by doing whatever we can to satisfy them, we receive God’s rescue. I like the way my friend Heather Nelson captures this idea by saying, “God sent Jesus Christ to take on the consequences of our idolatrous affair. He became sin so that we might become righteous. In Christ, God gives us freedom from sin’s power now and hope for its eradication in heaven. God makes you beautiful with the beauty of His Son, Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

Inner beauty changes the way we think and feel about our bodies and appearances, not leading us to “let it go” nor enslaving us to asking always, “Am I pretty or ugly? Does this make me look fat or skinny?” Rather than gazing at the mirrors of media, we are to be fixed on God’s image in Jesus Christ. Romans 12:1–2 says, “I urge you therefore [sisters], by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Transformation *from the inside out* is God’s effective treatment for body image struggles, and has eternal value while we live in our bodies on this earth.

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struggles. She coauthored *Sexual Sanity for Women: Healing from Sexual and Relational Brokenness*, and has written numerous articles on godly relationships and sexuality.

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## NOTES

- 1 Body image problems are a growing issue among males as well. Jaime Santa Cruz, "Body-image Pressure Increasingly Affects Boys," *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/03/body-image-pressure-increasingly-affects-boys/283897/>.
- 2 Mayo Clinic Staff, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder/basics/definition/con-20029953>.
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyJGk>.
- 4 <http://www.dove.co.uk/en/Tips-Topics-and-Tools/Articles-and-Advice/Only-2per-of-women-think-they-are-beautiful.aspx>.
- 5 "Self-confessed Surgery Addict Joan Rivers Celebrates 80th Birthday," June 7, 2013, <http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/celebrity-life/self-confessed-surgery-addict-joan-rivers-celebrates-80th-birthday/story-e6frfmqi-1226659307136>.
- 6 All Scripture references from the New American Standard Bible.
- 7 Julie Lowe, "Body Image," March 4, 2013, [www.ccef.org/resources/blog/body-image](http://www.ccef.org/resources/blog/body-image).
- 8 <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder/basics/definition/con-20029953>.
- 9 Heather Davis Nelson, "Chasing Beauty," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 24, 1 (2006): 60.