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MODESTY, OBJECTIVISM, AND HUMAN VALUE

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Recently our family settled down to watch a football game on network television. During one of the breaks, a commercial appeared for an upcoming horror movie. Our children instinctively looked away from the disturbing images on the screen, and I praised them for doing so. When the commercial break ended and the game returned, the camera panned to a group of cheerleaders whose outfits could be described as “breezy.” I immediately had the urge to ask my boys to avert their eyes from the television screen. Thankfully, I did not. Should I be sending my preteen and teen boys the message that seeing the bare midriff of a woman is as terrifying as a horror movie? What does that attitude reveal about my evaluation of a woman’s body? What message does that send my developing teen daughter seated next to me?

It seems most discussions about modesty in the Christian world acknowledge the idea that a woman is not entirely responsible for a man’s lustful thoughts. However, the discussion then inevitably focuses on what is appropriate for a woman to wear to help the men around her not to stumble. As one popular blogger stated in a disclaimer, “Women are NOT at fault for men struggling with lust, *but* women can help their brothers in this battle by dressing in ways that are modest and pure.”¹ Women frequently are confronted with a list of clothing rules for what is modest² and modesty police ready to confront those who do not comply.³ What starts out focusing on the inside of a man’s heart devolves into an argument about whether yoga pants or a bare midriff is ever acceptable.

A woman’s body becomes an inherently dangerous sinful object. Her duty is to cover up as much sensitive skin as possible and to render her body shapeless. Men are viewed as weak, having to endure the challenge of avoiding seeing a woman’s image every day to avoid the sin of lust. For many men, blindness appears to be the best defense against this sin. For example, in a book promoting modesty, a young man gave a testimony regarding his struggles with lust on his college campus. He described the campus full of attractive women as a “loaded minefield,” and he needed to focus daily on Scripture, worship music, prayer, or looking down at the sidewalk just to get through the day. “All I know is that the way she presents herself to the world is bait for

my sinful mind to latch onto and I need to avoid it at all costs." The student is then commended by the author for his "tenacious fight for holiness."⁴

This blame shifting deeply saddens and concerns me. This young man is anxious to walk around school without falling into sinful lust. I can't imagine him ever being able to spend a day comfortably at the beach or pool without being tormented by the "evil" of a woman's immodest dress. I imagine his experience as being one surrounded by fearful demonic images, petrified to look up at what he might see and cause him to fall into sin. He has a problem with lust in his own mind, and he has blamed his struggle on the way women dress.

There has got to be a better way.

The Danger of Objectification. It is easy to get the impression that the enemy in the fight against male lust is the attractiveness of the female body, and our main weapon against it is the ability to look away. However, I believe this attitude gets both the enemy and the weapon incorrect. The reason why men struggle with lust is not because they have functioning eyes that see women but because they have a brain that tends to objectify what those eyes see. Objectification occurs when we view a woman not as an inherently valuable human being made in God's image but as an instrument for our own gratification and enjoyment. Objectifying others is always wrong because it treats God's valued creation as a mere object for us to use or judge. Seeing a woman as a mere collection of body parts instead of the integrated, valued, and beautiful individual that God created has disastrous consequences.

This objectification can be very subtle. In fact, in the student's quote above, you can see the objectification in his subtle use of language. His usage of the object words *bait* and *it* reveals that he is no longer viewing the woman as a valuable soul made in God's image. Another pastor asks the troubling question, "Are you advertising something that is not for sale?" when describing a woman's clothing choices. Shortly thereafter, "immodest" clothing is described as making a woman look "cheap."⁵ Regardless of a woman's motive for her dress, she is described in dehumanizing ways as an item that is advertised and priced as such. This vocabulary dehumanizes and objectifies women.

The Effect of Objectification on Men. The transformation of women into tempting objects not only objectifies women but also men. Men are not seen as morally responsible and capable of avoiding sin. We are viewed as a mere sum of our unbridled desires that control us when we view a bare shoulder or navel. We are reduced from valuable human beings with the capacity to view the beauty of God's creation to creatures enslaved to our lustful flesh. This is not worthy of men who have been regenerated in the Holy Spirit.

This also results in an attitude of codependent sin. Men are no longer solely responsible for what occurs in our hearts but share the responsibility with the object of our lust. Objectification also endorses the idea that there is something inherently shameful about a woman's body. Witnessing and recognizing beauty is not innately

sinful and does not automatically lead to lust. Recognizing that a woman is attractive is very different than mentally taking her to your bed.

The Effect of Objectification on Women. There is no question that the trend in women's clothing in our culture has resulted in progressively more skin being revealed. Part of the reason is that we live in a culture that increasingly objectifies women and values them by their external appearance. The image of a beautiful woman's body is used to sell products of every type. The bestselling issue of a major sports magazine eschews sports altogether in order to show women in swimsuits. Our young women experience the objectification that is happening all around us and don't know how to respond to it. How do they respond to being valued only by the way they look? The result of the pressure that many girls feel can easily be seen with the epidemic of body dysmorphic disorders, depression, and self-harming behavior.

The church should be a safe place in which a woman can be recognized as having dignity regardless of her physical appearance. It is the place where every one of us has value not based on our image but on the image of our Creator. The world objectifies women by assigning value to their appearance. The church objectifies women by treating them as sin bait and not as God created them. Both are wrong.

Furthermore, the impact of this belief on the self-worth of our young women is heartbreaking. Women are seen as having the inherent power in their bodies to cause a man to go to hell. There is a felt shame in the fact that there is no way a woman can get rid of her offensive body. The only thing she can do is to attempt to cover it up, with the knowledge that it is still always a part of her. As blogger Becca Rose states, "The main thing that taught me to hate and fear my body was the Church."⁶ In a world that frequently fails to see beyond the physical, the church makes the same tragic error.

Reevaluation, Not Avoidance. I believe the solution to a man's lust is not visual avoidance but reevaluation. The skin that we are trying to avoid looking at is part of an intrinsically valuable human being that God has created in His image. The value of a woman cannot be quantified, for it is immeasurable. It cannot be hidden, for it is not physical. It cannot be denied, for God designed it. The problem is not what a man sees but how he views a woman. Regardless of her dress or appearance, she is almost certainly more interesting, more complex, and more valuable than what she appears on the outside. Recognition of this fact is the best way to fight the battle against lust.

I have since taught my sons not to look away. Instead, take a closer look at what God has created. The person that you are looking at is a valuable human being made in God's image. This is true if the person is an extremely attractive woman in a "breezy" outfit or one who is struggling with her weight. This is true whether the person has the benefit of youthful skin or the advantage of wrinkles from many years of experience. It is true if the individual has a fantastic voice or the loving eyes of one with Down syndrome. Don't look away, but make sure that you look at them with their real value assigned to them by our loving Creator. —*Richard J. Poupard*

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NOTES

- 1 Jarrid Wilson, "The Importance of Modesty and Self-Control," January 26, 2015, <http://jarridwilson.com/importance-modesty-self-control/#more-5926>, emphasis added.
- 2 An amusing example can be found at Kate Schell, "Immodest Proposals: The Rules," Kate Schell, February 4, 2015, <https://kateschell.wordpress.com/2015/02/04/ip-rules/>.
- 3 Jonalyn Fincher, "Modesty: Covering up Is Not the Answer," RubySlippers, August 8, 2012, <http://soulation.org/jonalynblog/2012/08/modesty-is-a-chameleon.html>.
- 4 C. J. Mahaney and Craig Cabaniss, *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 125–27.
- 5 Rick Hermann, "The Theology of Yoga Pants," The Dad Life, March 26 2014, <https://pastorrickhermann.wordpress.com/2014/03/26/the-theology-of-yoga-pants/>.
- 6 Becca Rose, "BookwormBeauty: The Only Thing My Double D's Ever Got Me Was Kicked Out of Church," BookwormBeauty, May 27, 2013, <http://www.bookwormbeauty.com/2013/05/the-only-thing-my-double-ds-ever-got-me.html>.