

# Beauty, Body & Fashion

## INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

How important is outward appearance in today's society?

Why are some people regarded as being more attractive than others?

How are attractive people treated differently to unattractive people?

What do you think people hope to achieve by changing their outward appearance?

## BEAUTY AND APPEARANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

### (1) People derive their identity from their physical appearance

Society is obsessed with outward appearance and beauty. Beauty brings power, status and opportunity, particularly sexual power. Individuals therefore derive their sense of identity and personal value from the way they look.

### (2) Society seeks to make people feel dissatisfied with the way they look

The fashion and beauty industry relies upon the ability to make men and women feel dissatisfied with their bodies and their appearance. This persuades people to spend money on new 'fashionable' clothes, even when their current clothes have not worn out, to purchase expensive 'beauty' treatments, to follow diets and join the exercise culture. Dissatisfaction is generated by the public promotion of the 'beauty elite' as role models. We are asked to measure ourselves against standards of beauty that we cannot achieve. People are encouraged to feel unhappy about themselves.

### (3) People seek to change their identity by changing their outward appearance

People who are unhappy with the way that they look are told to change their identity by changing their appearance. This approach is typified by the 'make-over' philosophy which dominates men's and women's beauty magazines, and which has spawned a genre of TV programmes.

### (4) Problems arising when people derive their identity from their physical appearance

Inevitably some people are less attractive than others. This may be because of genetic or biological reasons, or for lifestyle reasons, for example because they over eat. Some people feel unattractive even when they are attractive. This might be a result of the fact that they were regarded as unattractive in the past, for example when they were a child or going through adolescence. People may feel a lack of self-esteem, inadequacy, or even a sense of self-hatred towards their bodies and appearance. This may lead to severe psychological disorders such as anorexia and self-mutilation.

## BEAUTY AND APPEARANCE IN THE BIBLE

### (1) Some people are more beautiful than others

The Bible recognises that some people, both men and women, are more beautiful than others. Amongst women, Rebekah (Gen 26v7), Rachel (Gen 29v17) and Esther (Esth 1v11) are described as beautiful. Amongst men, Saul (1 Sam 9v2), David (1 Sam 16v12) and Absalom (2 Sam 14v25) are described as being attractive in appearance. In the Song of Songs the husband is captivated by the beauty of his wife (eg 1v9 & 15; 4v1-7; 6v4-9; 7v1-9) and the wife by the beauty of her husband (eg 2v8-9; 5v5; 5v10-16).

### (2) God is concerned with inner beauty

Whilst recognising that some people are more outwardly attractive than others, the Bible makes clear that God is not concerned about outward beauty. God is concerned about the inner beauty of our hearts, in other words with our characters.

*Read: 1 Samuel 16v7; Proverbs 6v25; Proverbs 31v10 & 30; Isaiah 53v2; 1 Peter 3v3-4*

How does God's attitude towards beauty differ from the attitude of our society?

Why is it foolish to build our sense of identity upon our outward appearance?

We have seen repeatedly that Christians are called to find their identity in Christ. God is at work to transform Christians into the likeness of his Son (Ephesians 4v20-24; Colossians 3v10). Our priority should be to undertake a 'character make-over' so that we will become more and more like Jesus.

## **STRIVING TO BE MORE BEAUTIFUL IN THE BIBLE**

Although God values inward beauty rather than external beauty, this does not necessarily mean that we should be unconcerned about our appearance. However we must make sure that we share God's priority, so that we put the development of godly character ahead of physical beauty.

### **(1) Improving our image by changing our bodies**

Many people in contemporary society are concerned to ensure that they gain the 'perfect' body. This is reflected in a gym, exercise and diet culture, and more extremely in the growing popularity of plastic surgery.

*Read: 1 Timothy 4v8; Leviticus 19v28; Proverbs 23v2; Jeremiah 5v26-28*

Why do people want to try to change their bodies?

In the light of these verses, what attitude should Christians have towards the ways in which people might want to change their bodies?

Obesity due to overeating is essentially a modern western problem, caused by the ready availability of high calorie food, and our less physically demanding lifestyles. In the Bible there were few people who were fat, and these were usually the rich, who were able to indulge themselves (eg Judges 3v7). The Bible is therefore more concerned with ensuring that people have enough food to live. However it does warn against gluttony and greed, and self-control is one of the key Christian character qualities.

### **(2) Improving our image by changing our appearance**

One of the main ways in which people might improve their appearance is through the use of beauty products, make up and decorations such as jewellery.

*Read: Esther 2v12-18; Song of Songs 3v6-7; 2 Kings 9v30; 1 Peter 3v3-4; Isaiah 3v16-26*

Should Christians make use of beauty products to improve their appearance?

What principles should limit the willingness of Christians to seek after such means of improving their appearance?

### **(3) Improving our image by changing our clothes**

Contemporary society is obsessed with fashion. The clothes that people wear make a statement about their identity.

*Read: 1 Timothy 2v9-10; 1 Peter 3v3-5*

According to these verses, what principles should determine the clothing that Christians wear?

How does this compare with the attitudes of contemporary society towards the clothes we wear?

## **BEAUTY AND APPEARANCE IN THE CHURCH**

It is vital that the values of society are not replicated in the life of the church. Since God does not judge by external appearance, we need to make sure that we do not judge fellow Christians by their outward beauty. James 2v1-7 and 1 Corinthians 1v26-31 concern material poverty, they could equally apply to the 'poverty of appearance' which is just as much of a handicap in modern society. The beauty culture of society is driven by the 'cult of youth.' Christians need to encourage an appreciation for the qualities of age, such as wisdom and maturity (eg Leviticus 19v32; Proverbs 16v31; 20v29; 23v22)

In what ways do Christians judge one another by their outward appearance?

What steps can the church take to ensure that it creates a culture where Christians are not judged by their outward appearance?