

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Ian Mears

Practical Christian Witness: Witnessing by the way we dress

People wear clothes. In fact, we all do. I expect you've noticed. I wonder why it is so automatic amongst humans? It is not just common; it is virtually universal. There are very few societies around the world which have traditionally never worn clothes. Nowadays only nudists prefer no clothes at all; there are relatively few of them and even they, whatever they may prefer, dress normally in public. In fact, humans are unique in all creation, as far as I am aware, in that we can dress ourselves - and we are shaped to wear clothes easily - they hang from our shoulders and our hips. You can put clothes on a dog but I've never seen one which could dress itself.

Is it the weather which makes clothing so necessary? Well, if you live inside the Arctic Circle, the weather certainly dictates what kind of clothing you wear to keep out the intense cold. If you live in a hot desert, you need the traditional flowing garments worn by people such as the Bedouin, sometimes covering even most of the face, in order to protect from the sun and wind, and to create a draught up through the clothes.

But for the rest of us, living between these extremes, we still wear clothes whatever the temperature. Even on the beach on a very hot day, we still wear something. Why do we feel the need to dress, to cover up? What do clothes do for us? Let's see from the Bible what God says about the origin of clothes. In Genesis 3, right at the beginning of human existence, we read that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent had promised them that, if they ate the fruit, they would be as God, knowing good and evil. And that is what happened as far as knowing good and evil went, but their disobedience didn't make them equal to God. All it did was to give them a bad conscience and the experience of shame. They discovered that they were naked - not really a great discovery, hardly a big stride forward in the realms of human achievement. Their first and most immediate impulse was to cover themselves, and they resorted to fig leaves, which were rather pathetic and scarcely adequate. They hid themselves from each other and then they hid from God when He walked in the Garden of Eden and called to them.

So the basic and fundamental reason for wearing clothes is shame, not the weather. Being naked is embarrassing. This feeling of shame carries over, of course, too much of the other aspects of our lives and our personalities. We cover up in public and in private not just by being dressed but by behaving in such a way as to keep ourselves acceptable to other people. If our behaviour is really uninhibited and uncontrolled, we may find ourselves in trouble or even have to take medication. Telling lies is a common way for people to protect themselves - they find the truth too difficult to face, whether to avoid trouble ("it wasn't me") or to look better than they are by exaggerating because their actual performance is poorer than they find comfortable or other people expect of them. No one knows the real us - the fears and insecurity, the feelings of inferiority, the disappointments and frustrations, what we really think about other people, the hatreds, the nastier and dirtier side of us, otherwise known as the "beast in the basement", and the fantasies, which can be embarrassingly pathetic or for some of us can be very nasty indeed, as can sometimes be seen on those occasions someone actually acts out their fantasies with horrible results. And what about us? Ah, well - we're not telling, are we? That's our secret.

But all these things are known to God. They cannot be hidden from Him. And just as He provided animal skins to provide a much more adequate covering for Adam and Eve than the fig leaves they had made for themselves, so only He can provide a spiritual covering so much more effective than anything we can provide for ourselves. He has provided a covering for our sins which is perfectly adequate even in His presence. Just as the animal skins could only come from dead animals, so our covering, our garments of salvation, could only be provided through the death of another. Not, this time, dead animals but the death of God's own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, His death does not only cover our sins from God's eyes but actually cleanses us from them - "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin," as we read in 1 John 1:7. So the person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ can stand before God without shame or embarrassment not only because God knows it all and has forgiven it all for Jesus' sake but because He has actually forgotten it all. Hebrews 10:17 tells us, "Their sins and their iniquities I will remember no more." What may cause us acute shame because we cannot forget, God has forgotten and will never bring up that particular sin again.

Well, clothes protect us, not just from the weather, but from each other, and perhaps even from ourselves. Clothes help us face the world and make us feel better about ourselves. What is less acceptable about our appearance -

because we really do not look better unclothed - clothes helpfully cover up. New clothes or the feeling that we've got it right for a particular occasion can make an enormous difference to our morale and sense of well-being. The right clothes can make us feel we belong and that we are keeping up with the others. On the other hand, the wrong clothes, or torn or dirty clothes have completely the opposite effect. The feeling that our clothes are unsuitable or even inadequate can be very unnerving. I knew a man who was due to go to function which he hadn't realised until too late was a black tie affair. He couldn't get hold of the black jacket etc in time so, not surprisingly, he just didn't go although his suit had been perfectly adequate for every other function he had attended that day.

God, too, expects us to be wearing the correct spiritual garments - remember the man in the Lord's parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22. The king who was giving the feast for his son's marriage saw a man there who was not wearing a wedding garment. The king asked him what he was doing there. This man's lack of the proper clothes caused the king to tell his servants to bind the man hand and foot, to take him away, and throw him into outer darkness, where there would be weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth. So we need the salvation which God Himself provides if we are to be fit for His presence in heaven.

I don't know how long it took but, sooner or later, people realised that clothes could do more than just protect - clothes also enable us to display our personalities, our taste, our wealth, or lack of it, and our place in society, or lack of that. Around the world, clothing identifies us as men or women, sometimes what race, tribe, district or religion we belong to, or even what football team we support. Clothes can be a uniform and, in fact, they generally are, whether we are conscious of it or not. They help us to see whether someone is a postman, a police officer, a traffic warden, a nurse, a soldier, the gasman or whatever. It is often very necessary to be able to identify who is at the door, who is checking our tickets, or the difference between staff and customers at the supermarket. We may take pride in both the way we dress and our uniform, especially if it shows that we belong to an organisation we are proud to work for. If we are more important than other people, what we wear can show that - for example, the army officer's badges, academic gowns at a university's graduation ceremony, or the boss's expensive suit. Misinterpreting the signals sent out by people's clothes can lead to embarrassing mistakes, which is why hospitals often have notices up showing what the different uniforms the staff wear mean.

So clothes say a lot about us, how we see ourselves, where we think we belong, what we can afford, our personalities, and also what we think is suitable for the place and occasion. They also show how conventional we are and whether we deliberately look different from what might be expected.

If clothes say so much about us, and they do whether we like it or not, what should they be saying about us as Christians? Does it matter what we look like? Surely it does because we are inescapably giving a message to everyone who sees us. We generally probably do not realise how much notice we take of how people are dressed until they look different from what we expect. Our appearance does have an impact, so much so that we tell each other that we must not judge others by their appearance.

So what do people see when they see us? Obviously, if we are a physiotherapist in a hospital, a gasman or fireman etc we have little choice in what we wear when we are at work. The uniform will be part of the job and will probably be provided by the employer. But for most of us most of the time, the way we dress is a matter of choice. Even if we are expected to wear, for instance, a suit where we work, that still leaves us with a lot of scope for showing our individuality, so people see the real us. They see whether we have taste, whether we are flamboyant and showy or self-effacing, prefer bright or sombre colours or whether we wish it to be known that we belong to a particular group or type of person by a badge, or tie - old school, college or professional association for example.

What message should a Christian be sending? Are we to please ourselves? Or please others? To fit in? Sometimes, of course, we have to wear what the occasion demands or what others prefer. But, more importantly, our appearance should please God. Surely that must be our aim. Here we have the great example of our Lord Jesus Christ. At His baptism in the Jordan, God spoke from heaven and said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," Matthew 3:16-17. In other words, everything about the Lord Jesus was completely pleasing to God. Did God ever make such a statement about anyone else in such a public fashion? Of course not. But even though the Lord Jesus was unique in His sinless perfection and in the way that He alone out of all humanity was completely and exactly what God His Father wanted in a man, He still is our example to follow. He said in John 8:29, "I always do those things that please Him," meaning God the Father, of course.

We, too, are to please God. In 1 John 3:22 we are told that pleasing God is required for our prayers to be answered. The apostle Paul told the Christians in Colossae that he prayed, amongst other things, that they might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him. Paul also reminded the Corinthian church that they were not their own; they had been bought with a price. In Philippians 2:13, he tells us, "... it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." So both the example of the Lord Jesus and the commands of the Scriptures show us very clearly that every aspect of a Christian's life should be fully pleasing to God.

Now where does this leave us? What is the Christian's uniform? Is there one? Some Christians do think they should wear a uniform. People as diverse as the Salvation Army, monks, nuns, members of groups such as the Amish and ministers of religion dress in a way that deliberately identifies them, although fewer and fewer clergymen and ministers still wear a dog collar. It is easy to see the usefulness of a distinctive dress from their point of view but is it found in the Bible? Does the Bible give us a list of clothes we must wear and clothes we must not? Does God prefer certain colours and styles and prohibit others? I may have missed something but, as far as I am aware, the only definite instructions about particular items of clothing that had to be worn were for the priests of Israel, who had their ceremonial dress set out in detail in Exodus 28, and the fringe of blue which all male Israelites had to wear at the hem of their garments, mentioned in Numbers 15:37-41. This was worn in the days of the Lord Jesus and He referred in Matthew 23:5 to the fact that the Pharisees enlarged these fringes. Orthodox Jews today still wear the blue fringe. As Christians we are obviously not required to do this.

What guidelines, then, does the Bible give us? How we dress must be a reflection of our inner spiritual life and indeed, it actually is. Here the Bible does not leave us floundering for clues about what this should be. To a large extent, Christian growth is not automatic but we must work at it to obtain it by increasing our knowledge of the Bible and living in a way which pleases God. If we sin, if our everyday conduct is not in accordance with God's Word, then we cannot expect to grow as Christians, nor can we expect to enjoy the Christian experience which comes from obedience to the Lord. This knowledge of the contents of the Bible and of the faith, that is, the basic tenets of Christianity, won't just happen by itself. However, there is not only factual knowledge to be acquired but also the experience of God's character and ways, and what He expects of His people. These can only come through repeated reading of the Bible, fellowship with other Christians and the experience of the Christian pathway with God.

In addition, there are aspects of the Christian life which we only experience through obedience. I have already mentioned that pleasing God is necessary if we wish God to answer our prayers. The Lord Jesus said in John 14:21, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him."

Apart from these, much of what we are to do as believers is simply being what God has made us in Christ. For instance, we do not have to work hard in order to receive the Holy Spirit; He is God's gift to every believer, but it is our responsibility to be filled with the Spirit. In our context of how we appear to the world at large, we can think of what the Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "You are the salt of the earth." He did not say, "You must try and become the salt of the earth. If you try really hard, you might eventually succeed." His listeners were not to struggle to achieve being salt in a corrupt world but instead had to act in accordance with what He had said they already were, to live up to it and to ensure that they did not become useless by losing their flavour. He also said "You are the light of the world." He did not say, "You must have this goal before you of becoming the light of the world." No, He simply told His listeners what they were, and followed it up by saying that their light should not be hidden and, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

So then, how a Christian dresses should be a product, not of rules and regulations thought up for us by others, but of acquaintance with God's Word and obedience to it, and not just to one or two verses but to the whole of the Bible in general. When I was working, I had to be aware of and practise all that the post I was in entailed and not just one or two bits and then think that I had mastered the entire job. It is even more so in the things of God.

Now then, what does the New Testament say to today's believers about their dress? Well, first of all, we read in 1 Corinthians 11 that, when Christians come together, men are to have their heads uncovered and women to have theirs covered, and men should not have long hair but women should. It's a contentious subject but it seems to me that is what that passage of Scripture teaches us.

Secondly, we read in 1 Timothy 2:8-10, "I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works." I don't suppose many women braid their hair nowadays but, if you see busts or pictures of upper class Roman women from New Testament times, you will note that they had very elaborate hair styles with a lot of braiding and curls. No doubt, this was what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote the passage just quoted and the principle of avoiding expensive excess still applies.

So what is to be our guide? It seems to me to be a lack of ostentation, of anything that draws attention to us. We should not aim to keep up with the latest fashions. What God is looking for, and this is what really matters, is being adorned with good works. This is attractive in itself. A person who is acting as salt and light, whose Christian walk is one of obedience to Christ, love for Him and acquaintance with the great truths of the Bible, especially God's salvation, will surely have an outer glow, a smile which transforms the expression that makes their clothes almost irrelevant. But those clothes will be consistent with the inner reality.

Fortunately, today you can wear virtually whatever you like and, in terms of fashion, get away with it, so to speak. You can wear brightly coloured shirts, there is not the same insistence on ties, in offices suits are giving way in some quarters to more casual wear, hemlines can be of any length and so on. However, this more relaxed approach is also currently accompanied by a tendency towards more revealing clothes. This sends out a signal; it triggers a reaction. The signal may not be intended by the wearer and is definitely not intended by a Christian woman. The reaction by the onlooker may only be a mild one but both the signal and the reaction are there. The reaction may be sexual but it is often critical or even disgusted. So we do need to be careful, bearing in mind that our appearance is not just for our benefit but is part of our relationship with the Lord and should be an element in our witness to Him. Can some of today's fashions really be called modest apparel? Would propriety and moderation really apply to them? Do such clothes really show that we belong to Christ? If we wear the latest fashions, especially the type I have just mentioned, what is our reason for doing so? Are we either deliberately or subconsciously trying to attract, to appear fashionable, to look like what we think is typical of our age group or what? Perhaps we haven't really thought about it. Well, perhaps we should.

Another thing we might bear in mind is that not all of us have bodies which bear much exposure. Flab and sag, alas, do not win any admiration but they can attract criticism and unkind comments behind our backs, things the Christian should avoid arousing if possible.

Now there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that we should wear old-fashioned, dowdy, clothes of such plainness as to be unattractive and peculiar. Untidiness or looking as though we haven't given any thought to our dress should not mark us. If we are God's children, we should surely not look slovenly. We should look the part. It can be difficult sometimes to find something suitable. I understand that ladies' tee shirts which don't leave a gap in the middle are quite difficult to obtain. Recently, a lady I know told me that the clothes in a large well-known chain store were all designed to be immodest, apart from those for the elderly. Well, actually, she put it more strongly than that. It's obvious we live in a world which has no Christian basis and is quite unsympathetic to the Christian viewpoint. Christian standards do not count. Today's fashions tend to make us look cheap, especially those for women. That surely can't be right for God's children. But we do not have to go with the current; we can stand against it.

So much of how we dress is a matter of individual taste. What we must never do is draw up a list of what is acceptable and what is not, especially if we apply that list to other people and judge them according to what we think is right and proper. This is the sort of thing the Pharisees would have done. After all, as we saw earlier, the New Testament does not give us a list of clothes to wear and clothes to avoid. It does not tell us we should wear a Christian badge - a fish, for example. Or a t-shirt with a verse of Scripture or a Christian slogan. Of course, we can if we think that is the Lord's will for us and they certainly can be helpful. They do have the merit of showing that we belong to Christ. Perhaps those of us who do not wear a fish or some other distinguishing item should ask ourselves why we don't. Is it because we sometimes behave publicly in a way that is inconsistent with being a Christian?

Mind you, we have to be careful. I recently saw a tee-shirt emblazoned with the words, "When God made me, He was showing off." A bit over the top perhaps.

The way I have spoken about this subject might give the impression that I regarded it as the be all and end all of things. Or that I was peculiar about necklines and hemlines. That is not the case. Being obsessive or neurotic about clothes - our own or other people's - is to be avoided. We mustn't worry excessively about whether we should have bought the new trousers or skirt we've just got. First of all, it's too late to do anything about it. Secondly, the way we dress is not an individual aspect of our lives, independent of other things. It is part of the totality of the way we live as Christians. We need to base our decisions on what Paul wrote to Timothy, quoted earlier - is our dress modest? Is it marked by propriety, consistent with accepted good behaviour? Is it moderate? Does it go with professing godliness? And, am I spending too much on my clothes? This last one is not as straightforward as it might appear. For instance, buying the cheapest can work out more expensive in the long run. We may not have much to spend on clothes in any case. Again, it's an individual decision, between us and the Lord and is only a part of our walk with Him.

Like the segments of an orange, each part of our life is very much part of the whole, intimately connected with the rest. May our lives be properly integrated, with Christ as our centre so that our clothes, along with the rest of our public demeanour, properly witness to Him, in a way consistent with His love and His holiness.

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