

Silent speech
Reflections on the biblical position toward fashion and jewelry

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September 5, 2005 (last revised March 6, 2007)

"The highest form of vanity is love of fame." - George Santayana

"I am speaking through my clothes." - Umberto Eco

There can be no doubt that what a person chooses to wear sends messages. Some people use their clothes to say "See how nice I look!" while others say "Look at the shape of my body!" Others project wealth, rebelliousness, stylishness, or a manner associated with a particular group. A common element behind these efforts is often a desire to gain attention, admiration, or approval. All throughout history, clothing and outward appearance have been used as a way to send messages. In fact, the behavior of seeking approval and admiration through outward appearance occurred in the religiously minded of Jesus' day:

They [the Pharisees] do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries [a box containing bible verses worn on the head and arm] broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. (Matthew 23:5-7)

The New Living Translation accurately captures the sentiment of this passage with its vivid translation:

Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes. And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the most prominent seats in the synagogue! They enjoy the attention they get on the streets, and they enjoy being called 'Rabbi.' (Matthew 23:5-7, NLT)

In their own way, the Pharisees were caught up in the trap of seeking the admiration and praise of others. By trying to demonstrate how religious they were, their ultimate goal was actually to bring admiration to themselves and not to God. This exemplifies the fact that human nature has always been inclined to pursue attention. While there are different ways to seek attention, experience and observation teaches that fashion is one of the most common ways that people pursue approval and admiration. After all, one's outward appearance is a very obvious and public sight, and something that is easily changed.

Few would disagree that people often seek others' attention or approval and that fashion is an easy and common way to do so. Yet this practice of seeking others' attention or approval is something that any Christian must thoroughly reject. Is not seeking human approval yet another manifestation of pride and selfishness? Is it not thoroughly alien to the spirit of Christ? As Paul says, *"Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ"* (Galatians 1:10). Looking for

others' admiration or approval is a Pharisaical trap, and something that must be thoroughly guarded against.

With this background, we may approach two scarcely read passages in the New Testament that most directly address the subject at hand, the first by Paul. (Both translations are my own, intentionally very literal from the Greek.)

Likewise I want women to adorn themselves in respectable attire, with modesty and self-control, not with braids and gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but as is appropriate for women professing godliness, through good works. (1 Timothy 2:9-10)

Peter writes similarly in one of his letters:

Your adornment must not be external -- the braiding of hair, and wearing of gold, or dressing up in clothes -- but let it be the hidden person of the heart, in the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very valuable before God. (1 Peter 3:3-4)

There are obvious similarities in the passages, including the order that various items are mentioned -- first hair, then gold, then clothing. (Paul interposes an additional item, pearls.) While not apparent in English, the underlying Greek is quite different between the passages (for example, different words are used for the term braid). Peter's sentence construction is quite awkward in Greek; J.N.D. Kelly of Oxford University describes it as "distinctly clumsy." The awkwardness of Peter's construction, yet with striking similarities to Paul's writing in overall structure, and different word choices in Greek between the two passages may reflect the fact that Paul and Peter are independently translating an Aramaic saying into Greek, perhaps even an unrecorded saying of Jesus himself. Kelly writes that the similarity between 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4, "suggests that both passages draw on stock catechetical material." It should be noted that Peter uses the imperative verb (Greek: esto). (It should also be noted that the translators of the NASB, perhaps due to the bluntness of the command in 1 Peter 3:3-4, alter the meaning of the passage by adding the word "merely," a highly interpretive addition that is not contained in the Greek.) The context of Paul's injunction is house-church gatherings, while for Peter, it is general. Therefore it is hard to avoid the obvious interpretation that Paul and Peter were writing against the use of elaborate hairstyles, jewelry, expensive clothing, or other similar ornaments both inside and outside of church.

As is [surveyed in another essay](#), the church fathers, including Tertullian, Clement, Cyprian, Chrysostom, and Augustine, agreed with this straightforward interpretation. The church fathers concurred that Christians should not wear jewelry or pursue worldly fashion. The general acceptance of jewelry and fashion did not develop in the church until several centuries after the apostles. James Dunn notes a valuable hermeneutic principle, "If those closer to the thought world of Paul and closer to the issue ... show no inkling of the current interpretation, that interpretation is probably wrong." Yet today most pastors and church members reject the interpretation of the early church. Many pastors today are afraid to take a strong position on this subject, because they do not believe it themselves or for fear of offending the congregation.

Why do so many today reject the plain teaching of the text? Could it be possible that many do so, not on exegetical grounds, but by first disbelieving the conclusion and then searching for a way to justify that conclusion? Regardless of motive, three explanations are in common circulation as to why these commands are not applicable today. One theory is that wearing jewelry was associated with being a prostitute in the first century Roman Empire. The argument goes that since jewelry is no longer associated with prostitution, jewelry and expensive clothes are acceptable for today's world. The problem with this theory is that it is contradicted by historical evidence. Wearing jewelry and pursuing social trends were widespread in the Roman Empire, amongst all classes, and especially among women. *The Private Life of the Romans* by Harold Whetstone Johnston, revised by Mary Johnston (1903, 1932) contains valuable information about daily life in the Roman Empire. Far from being restricted to prostitutes, Johnston writes that, "The Roman woman was passionately fond of jewelry." Also see the following for more information: [link one](#) and [link two](#). The remarkable and ineluctable conclusion must be that Paul and Peter were exhorting their readers to be profoundly counter-cultural with the simplicity of their dress and the absence of ornaments.

A second argument that some have made against reading these texts as general statements against outward ornaments and worldly fashion is that Paul and Peter may have been dealing with class issues that were closely connected to the wearing of jewelry. This argument goes that if jewelry were only worn by the wealthy, then Paul and Peter may have wanted to abolish such socioeconomic distinctions amongst Christians. While the argument sounds plausible, it is not supported by historical evidence. J. Ramsey Michaels writes,

Peter's warnings against jewelry and extravagant dress in this passage do not necessarily mean that the women, and therefore the Christian communities in Asia Minor to which they belonged, were of the wealthy class. First, the lack of advice to slave owners tells against such an inference; second, the warnings against lavish adornment were, as we have seen, a very common, almost stereotyped, vehicle for moral teaching in the ancient world; third, Peter was situated over a thousand miles away from the churches to which he wrote, and he was in no position to know their economic status, rich or poor. (p. 172)

Moreover, we must remember that Peter's letter is to a wide audience (explicitly stated as believers in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" in 1 Peter 1:1). If there were some qualification to his command, surely he would have stated it to avoid misunderstanding in his diverse audience.

A third argument that some have made against making these commands applicable today is that in the Old Testament, some people of faith seemed to wear jewelry. For example, Rebecca wore a nosering (Genesis 24:30). The problem with this position is twofold. First, the Old Testament often describes the righteous deeds *and* sins of people of faith without commenting on either, making it difficult to see clearly what God approves of. For example, Jacob's polygamy is never frowned upon in the text of Genesis. Second, there are several passages in the Old Testament where jewelry is portrayed in a decidedly negative manner or sometimes even connected to idolatry (see Genesis 35:1-4, Exodus 33:1-6, Isaiah 3:16-24, Hosea 2:13).

As a related point to the third argument, others point out that there is a parable in the bible (Ezekiel 16) depicting jewelry in a positive light. (In contrast, Jesus' reference to a ring in Luke 15:22 is almost certainly a reference to a signet ring, an item that served a functional purpose, not a decorative one.) Yet it is difficult to claim that the instance of a "prop" in a parable can overturn the direct teachings of the apostles. For example, Jesus told a parable where a slave receives his just deserts by being beaten with many blows (Luke 12:47-48). However, it is clearly not valid to argue for the practice of beating slaves based on such a text. Parables use the language and motifs, both good and bad, that are common in a given culture. Parables are designed to teach one particular lesson, and to assume that other aspects of the parable are being endorsed is both exegetically unwarranted and dangerous. The most striking example of this is the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-15), where Jesus uses the example of a dishonest person to teach a lesson, but in no way endorses his unethical behavior. The details of the parable in Ezekiel must be treated in a similar way. After all, if a person decided to wear a crown in public and justified the decision because of Ezekiel 16:12, would we not say that was an unwarranted use of the text?

Parabolic arguments are also two-edged swords. For example, the apostle John portrays two women in the final book of the bible -- one symbolizing disobedience and the other as the bride of Christ. About the woman symbolizing disobedience, John writes, "*The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication.*" (Revelation 17:4) Of the bride of Christ, John writes, "*The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure -- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*" (Revelation 19:7-8) It appears that the pure and simple linen of Christ's bride stands in distinction to the ostentation and jewelry of the woman of disobedience. Those who favor rejecting the application of a literal reading of Paul and Peter on the grounds of a parable in Ezekiel must not be selective and ignore other texts that harm their case. So how do these pictures in Revelation interact with the other parables and teachings of the bible? Again, good exegesis demands that we place the highest weight on the explicit teachings of Paul and Peter.

Besides the words of the texts, and being wary of the dangers of prooftexting, it is important to consider the spirit of the passages of 1 Timothy 2:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:3-4. Even if these passages were not in Scripture, are they not logical derivations of "love God" and "love your neighbor as yourself"? Does not God call us to mimick the simplicity of Jesus in our actions? Does not the pursuit of outward adornments demonstrate a love of the world? Is not the money spent on jewelry, makeup, styling products, and worldly fashion (totaling in the billions of dollars annually) far better spent in advancing God's kingdom? After all, such things are bound to perish with time. The wise and godly person is the one who invests in what does not perish. (Also see Chrysostom's argument against jewelry as a contradiction to social justice in [the subsequent essay](#).)

Lest we fall into a legalistic mentality in understanding these passage, three things must clearly be stated. First, this must not only apply to women, particularly in today's "GQ" ideal for men. Men often seek attention through clothing and jewelry just like women, and sometimes even in other ways, such as through the muscular build of their bodies. Second, the teaching must apply

to anything that is outward that is used to gain attention. Besides gold, pearls, and expensive clothes, we must include styling the hair, seeking excessively thin bodies, "painting the eyes" (made famous by Jezebel in 2 Kings 9:30 and practiced by the two prostitutes of Ezekiel 23:40), extravagant watches, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, piercings, tattoos (also see Leviticus 19:28), tight clothing, nail-painting, the dyeing of hair, and showing midriff, provocative skin, or cleavage. For are these not all various manifestations of seeking external beauty? Thus, while not described by letter in this text, the spirit of it surely does. Third, it is most important to remember that this teaching flows from a principle, a heart-attitude of not seeking to gain the admiration of others. The foundational principle is simply, *"do not seek approval, attention, or admiration through fashion or outward adornment."*

Yet the possibility of self-deception is extremely high. Some might say, "I can wear jewelry, style my hair, or wear expensive clothes if my heart is right." On further reflection, this is nonsensical. As Charles Finney has said,

Just as well might the vulgar person say, "It does not matter what words I speak, if my heart is right." No, your heart is not right, unless your conduct is right. What is outward conduct, but the acting out of the heart? If your heart was right, you would not wish to follow the fashions of the world.

For several years I personally sought the attention of others through the way that I dressed, but did not even realize it. Sin easily blinds us. How many people are able to correctly acknowledge the intent of their actions? If pressed, one is apt to hear answers like, "I do it to feel beautiful, pretty, or handsome" or "because that's how everyone dresses." Yet implicit in these answers is there not the desire to gain the admiration and praise of others?

Many people will find this application difficult. Yet reason and Scripture both lead us to a life where we no longer seek praise for ourselves but only for God. We should be wary of the possibility that Pharisees are present today, not gaining praise by displaying piety and religion, but gaining praise by through the trappings of jewelry, worldly fashion, and expensive clothes. We should be still more wary that we are those Pharisees.

([Click here](#) for a second part to the essay, a survey of the early church fathers' views on this subject.)

Some sources:

Michaels, J.R. *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Peter*. Word Books, 1988.

Kelly, J.N.D. *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*. Baker Book House, 1969.

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