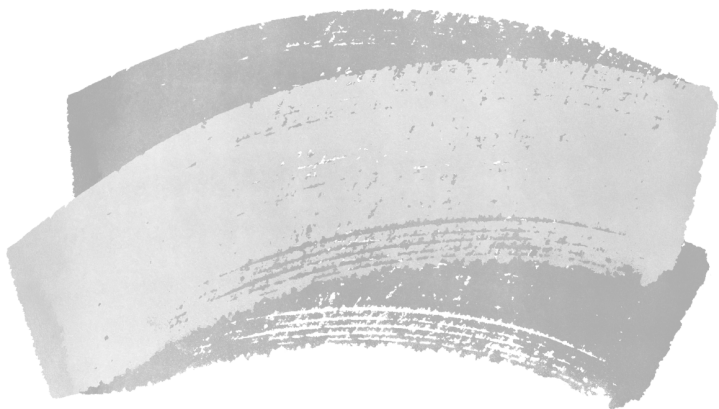


QUICK THEOLOGY

Modesty and Purity Culture



PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER

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phylicia@phyliciamasonheimer.com*

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phyliciamasonheimer.com



Introduction

We often tend to avoid talking about modesty because it gets so controversial so fast. I am no stranger to the modesty conversation and how crazy it can get. In fact, at the beginning of my writing career, I wrote a blog post on the topic that went viral. It had 90,000 hits in one day, and it became a source of such great controversy and such virality that it has actually been mentioned on both secular and Christian sources, including Refinery29 and many others.

I wrote the blog post from a pure heart. I truly believed in the message, and I was simply sharing my personal convictions. I was writing from my understanding of what modesty was and what it had to do with me, my sexuality, and the men around me. The post talked about a decision I had made not to wear yoga pants in public without something over them. It was called “The Day I Wear Yoga Pants: Five Myths About

Modesty.” In the post, I never told anybody what to do, and I never judged anyone. But because of the vitriolic nature of the modesty conversation, many people took it that way. I was even sent hate mail; it was a catastrophe. I left the post up on my blog for quite a while, but it continued to cause a ruckus online. Honestly, this hurt my heart because it was not what I intended the post to do. But eventually, I did take it down.

In this book, I will discuss some of the reasons I ended up taking that blog post down. Because even though my heart was in the right place, my understanding of these concepts was not as well-rounded and as biblical as it is today. As I look back with the wisdom I have now, I can see where I could have done better. I no longer have that post on my site for the sake of the weaker brother, for the sake of those struggling with legalism, and for the unbeliever who may be wondering what Christianity is about. I do not want anyone to think that modesty is the gospel.



What is Modesty?

When you hear the word ‘modesty’, what do you think? Almost immediately, most people think of sexuality and how we dress. We do not think of modesty right out of the gate as humility, even though that is exactly what it is. Back in the day, if you were to read a book talking about modesty, it would most likely refer to humility. That humility would then be described as being walked out in certain ways, whether it is how you talk about yourself, how you dress yourself, or how you engage with other people. Modesty is not drawing undue attention to yourself for prideful purposes, not exalting yourself, and not making much of yourself. Modesty was—and is—humility.

PURITY CULTURE AND FALSE MODESTY

The purity movement gained steam around the end of the 1980s through the 1990s. At this time a lot of the materials surrounding modesty began to gain traction. I grew up reading these books, such as *Secret Keeper*, which is all about what it means to be modest and to dress yourself with decorum. The idea that was subtly given to us when these books came out was that a woman's modesty helps protect the sexuality of men. By being modest, we as women can make sure men are not led into temptation. This was the idea that was perpetuated. In my experience, modesty was never framed as humility. It was called a heart issue, but it was framed as a sexuality issue. As soon as we began discussing it, the conversation revolved around the male response to me and my body, to my girlfriends and their bodies. We never once talked about pride or the attitude of the heart. The focus was always centered on the outward action.

I hope you had a different teaching on modesty. I hope you had a more well-rounded biblical basis for this conversation. But more likely you experienced much of what I did because this has been the primary teaching on modesty over the course of the last two to three decades.

There are a few passages that are often referred to in the modesty conversation. The first is Matthew 5:28, where Jesus is talking to a man about adultery. He says, “Anyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” I heard this verse used to say, “If I cause a man to look at me with lustful intent, then I have been complicit in adultery without a whole lot of conversation about the man’s choice in that matter.”

Another verse we see in this conversation is 1 Peter 3:3-4, which does not explicitly use the word ‘modesty’, but where Peter—speaking to the women of the church—says, “Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.” Some churches take this passage to literally mean you cannot braid your hair, you cannot wear gold jewelry, and you should not be wearing clothes that are colorful or beautiful to you. They take this passage to literally mean that those things are a sin. But I want to give a little history and context here.