

Chasing Beauty



by Heather Davis

American women are constantly bombarded with the world's unrealistic standards of beauty. The struggle begins early. It's as common to growing up as learning to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner." By the time a female reaches her teen years, she has already bought into the lie that there is an elusive, universally accepted, ideal woman—and she already falls far short. Until she reaches this impossible standard of beauty, she has no hope of acceptance in the culture around her. Without beauty, she has no opportunity to experience a man's true love—another impossible standard. Her life becomes a futile pursuit of beauty. She may struggle with restrictive eating, binge eating and purging, depression, compulsive shopping, or "serial dating" when she perceives that she has not succeeded in this system. She might gossip to elevate herself and lower those around her. Brief periods of success bring pride and inflate vanity. But these, too, do not last. How will she find true beauty?

The Pursuit of Beauty: The Struggle

We are all victims of the world we live in. Advertisements, TV programs, shopping malls,

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and fashion runways hold forth an unattainable standard of beauty that we are expected to achieve. But let's get even more personal. Many of you probably wrestle with voices from your past that have defined you. A parent encouraged you to lose a few more pounds. Your well-meaning aunt called you "pleasantly plump." Your boyfriend broke up with you when a gorgeous new girl showed up at school. Your coach pressured you to work out more (and lose weight) so that you could really reach "the next level."

For me, the struggle for beauty centered on the fashionable culture I grew up in, where appearance became social status and acceptance. We *are* victims of an ideal cultural image. Our culture projects expectations that both tell women who we should become and tells men what they should want. We feel guilty because we never reach this standard. But are we only victims?

Why do we buy into the standard set before us by the world? We incorrectly define what matters. We build ladders of comparison based on an impossible ideal of beauty, and we rate ourselves (and each other) according to how we measure up. But where does this ladder lead to? What is at the top? Perhaps we find brief and momentary worldly success—like a good-looking boyfriend or popularity or a positive self-image. Yet our experience proves

what God tells us in His Word: these are meaningless pursuits and empty treasures. If you choose to climb the ladder of beauty as defined by the world, you are on a journey to nowhere. Your condition is even more dire than this. Romans 1 clearly lays out the consequences of exchanging the pursuit of God's glory for your own. You embark on a journey that leads to your death.

This journey that leads to death has great implications for temporal life as well as eternity. You miss out on the abundant life found in Jesus: true joy, peace, hope, love, and freedom from chasing after impossibilities. A severed relationship with God always affects your relationships with people around you. To chase after elusive beauty is to run away from God into idolatry and adultery. You believe the promises of beauty. You heed its warnings. It promises that success is guaranteed by achieving beauty, the crown of which is the true love of a man who adores you. This idol warns that rejection, oblivion, and misery will arrive if you do not attain beauty. "Because both the promises and warnings are lies, service to each idol results in a hangover of misery and accursedness."¹

The Beauty Trap: How to Know When You're Caught

What is included in this "hangover of misery and accursedness?" In other words, how do you know when you are entangled in an idolatrous affair with worldly beauty? It often shows up in the mirror. How often do you check it? How do you view what you find there? I often allow the image I see in the mirror to tell me whether or not I should feel good about myself. Do I have the right clothes? Is my hair right? Will I enter the world (and even ministry) confident? Depression creeps in when I am not satisfied with who I see in the mirror. Maybe I go on a shopping spree to boost my wardrobe. I spend money I don't really have on clothes that I don't really need. I am chasing beauty. It has become what I worship.

I suspect that for many more, it comes down to how you view your weight. Do you constantly check the scale? Are you a size or two larger than you'd like to be? Maybe you compensate by eating less—or even fasting for a couple days (or weeks). You might exercise

compulsively. It could look like eating too much—and then getting rid of the evidence through purging. And each time you lose a few pounds, there are still a couple more that need to go. Before you know it, you are stuck in a cycle and have such a skewed image of yourself that you have forgotten what healthy really is. This misery points to the idol you serve.

Signs of the struggle might be more subtle. How do you view dating relationships? What are you looking for? I have dated three guys seriously and each relationship began well, with good intentions of pursuing godliness together. However, with each one I have allowed my boyfriend to define beauty for me. His voice became louder than God's, and so each break-up left me wrestling with not feeling beautiful. The only real solution seemed to be another dating relationship, and so I became a "serial dater," dating one guy after another. Do you have to have a date to feel beautiful? Maybe you flirt or dress immodestly to get guys' attention which you think will prove that you have attained beauty. In so doing, you are serving an idol.

A New Beauty: The Solution to Our Problem

We women are all guilty of this idolatrous affair with worldly beauty. How do you get out? Who will rescue you? If it's not another boyfriend, or better clothes, or weighing less, what is the solution? If the problem was with your self-image and you were merely a victim of the culture you live in, I would suggest that you do something—anything—to make yourself feel beautiful. Maybe I'd suggest that you date someone who truly values you, to buy nicer clothes, and to think positively whenever you look in the mirror or check the scales. In the end, you would be higher up on the ladder of beauty—but you would still be climbing to your death.

Just as our problem lies in what we worship, so the solution lies in who we come to worship. In pursuing worldly beauty, we strive to become this elusive image in place of who we really are. You and I are created in the image of the living God. Our purpose is to reflect His image to the world. But since the fall, we let the world inscribe its image on us. It is the very picture of sin and ultimately death. Instead of

being transformed to God's image, we conform to the world's image. We are hopelessly stuck in a lifeless cycle, exchanging God for the creature as our object of worship. But God in His mercy rescued us! In love, God sent Jesus Christ to take on the consequences of our idolatrous affair. He became sin so that we might become righteous. In Christ, God gives us freedom from sin's power now and hope for its eradication in heaven. God makes you beautiful with the beauty of His Son, Jesus. It is in gazing at God's image in Jesus Christ that you are transformed. Romans 12:1-2 says, "Therefore, I urge you, (sisters) in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

The gift of God in Jesus Christ is the Spirit. He comes to transform our hearts and to renew our minds. My new mirror becomes what God says about me in Jesus Christ and His Word. My delight becomes gazing at God's glory, not my own image. My concern becomes how to love other people instead of how other people can love me. The Spirit enables me to set down my ladder by which I judge and determine my own worth and to take up the cross by which I offer my life as a living sacrifice. This life of sacrificial worship to God gives me a new type of beauty. It is described by Peter as "the hidden person of the heart," of great value in God's sight (1 Pet. 3:4).

The best part about this new beauty is that it comes not as a result of our pursuit of it, but God gives it to us as a result of His pursuit of us. The question for us is how we will respond to Him moment-by-moment. It is in each daily decision that I have the choice to believe His promise and obey out of faith or to turn away from Him and serve a lie. The next time I flip

through a fashion magazine, will I succumb to the temporary beauty that allures me in its pages? Or will I refuse to compare myself to what I see there and flip through the pages of the Bible to gaze at God's true beauty? When you look in the mirror, what will you do with what you see? Will you start climbing the ladder of worldly beauty to achieve more visible success, or will you walk by faith in the yet unseen glory God clothes you with in Christ? When you find yourself caught in the cycle of an eating disorder or serial dating, will you allow God to rescue you and turn away from the lie to the living God?

I want to end with the hope of the beauty to come. This contains both good news and bad news. We have the good and sure promise that when we see Jesus we will be perfectly transformed because we will see Him as He is (1 John 3:2). But the bad news is that we must wait until we see Him to know the end of the struggle now. On earth you will struggle. You will never reach a place where the pursuit of worldly beauty has no power to attract you or deceive you or discourage you. Yet this is also glorious news because one day you *will* be free, and in the process of struggle, you are becoming free. It is in this hope of perfect Christ-reflecting beauty that we are encouraged—even enticed—to turn away from all that worldly beauty falsely promises today.

¹ Powlison, David. "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair.'" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Winter 1995), 37.