

## **LIVE|14 – Mistaken Identity** **“I Am What I Look Like” (Part 2 of 4)**

Psalm 139:7-17, 1 Peter 3:3-4

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*Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.  
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light about me be night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light with you.  
For you formed my inward parts;  
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
my soul knows it very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
in your book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them.  
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
Psalm 139: 7-17 (ESV)*

*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. 1 Peter 3:3-4 (ESV)*

Last week we began our four-week sermon series on the issue of identity. Our aim is to see what the Bible has to say about some very important and personal questions like: “Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” and “What is life all about?” Every one of us lives by the answers to those questions – more so than we probably even realize. It is very easy to simply “do life” without even thinking about the way that we are living from an “identity script.”

Our world and our hearts are filled with “broken narratives” or “incorrect scripts” or “mistaken identities” that control our lives. Last week we saw that we can too easily define ourselves by what we do, by our work, or by our accomplishments. But the gospel grounds us in our spiritual position in Christ, and it is out of that positional identity that the followers of Jesus are encouraged to do their work. Indicatives precede imperatives. Position precedes practice. The Bible changes who you are before it changes what you do.

The Biblical vision of identity is a life rooted in statements like “my life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3), “Christ is my life” (Col. 3:4), “Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11). A Christian identity means that you are in Christ, justified, adopted, a new creation, a saint, a servant of Christ, and a work-in-progress, all in and through a personal relationship with Jesus. And it is out of the bedrock of unmerited grace that we can work with excellence and drive and passion and sacrifice for others because our work is not ultimate.

Work can be maximized for God's glory and the good of others when you are not trying to use it to fill a God-shaped identity hole in your life.

### **Why Talk About How We Look?**

Today we are going to take up another mistaken identity issue, and it is something that I've never addressed in this manner before. I want to help us understand the Biblical perspective of appearance, beauty and attractiveness. My desire is to talk about physical beauty but also about our longing to "look" a certain way to people. So, I am not only concerned about externals; I want us to ask ourselves some questions about what we think is attractive, what is beautiful, and why.

From a cultural standpoint, being concerned about how you look is a major issue. Consider the following statistics:<sup>1</sup>

- In 2013 there were over 10.3 million surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures, which is a 471 percent increase since 1997.
- Research shows that somewhere between 80-90 percent of women and 43 percent of men report body dissatisfaction.
- Last year over \$12 billion dollars was spent on body altering procedures, not including clothing, make-up, hair-styling, tanning, etc.
- The median age for onset of an eating disorder in adolescents is 12 to 13 years old, and in the United States, 20 million women suffer from a clinically significant eating disorder at some time in their life.
- According to the CDC from women 20 years and older, the average height for women in America is 5'3" and weight is 166 pounds, but for fashion models the average height is 5'10" and 120 pounds.

There is an ache in the human soul about how we look and our appearance. The culture script and our own insecurity script keep us distracted, defeated, and even addicted to our looks. Some time ago a beauty company conducted a social experiment. They hired a criminal sketch artist who asked women to describe themselves as he drew their portrait without ever looking at them. The women were asked about their face, hair, cheek lines, eyes, etc. He drew what they described. Then he asked a stranger who had just met the woman to describe her appearance, and he drew a portrait based upon the stranger's answers. Then the sketch artist showed the women the two portraits.<sup>2</sup> The result was a stunning illustration of two narratives, and even more telling is the power of what we think we look like or what we think we should look like.

As powerful as the social experiment and the video is, I want to suggest to you that when it comes to beauty there really are three portraits, not just two: What you think of you, what others think of you, and what God thinks of you. And I want to try to help us understand a biblical viewpoint on the body and how we appear.

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from - <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2014/july/why-pastors-should-preach-about-body-image.html?> and

<sup>2</sup> You can see the entire video here: <http://youtu.be/litXW91UauE>

## **Five Biblical Truths Regarding Beauty and the Body**

You might be surprised how much the Bible has to say about this subject. There is actually a fairly compelling script as it relates to how the Bible addresses how we look and how we think about the body.

### **1) We are wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14-15)**

For all that is imperfect about the created order and even about our physical appearance, the human body is an amazing creative feat. Psalm 139 is a text extolling the sovereignty of God. God is able to search us and know us (v. 1). He knows what we do, what we are thinking, what we say, and what we are going to say (vv. 2-4). What's more, there is no place to hide from God's presence (v 4-12). And when David thinks about how his life came to be, he is amazed at God's creative power:

*For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Ps. 139:13-15 (ESV)*

Can you imagine how miraculous the conception and birth of children must have seemed to a person in the Old Testament without the benefit of ultrasound imaging or scientific understanding? The whole process would have been shrouded in mystery and wonder. But even with our technological advances and our ability to see what is happening in the womb, it is still a miracle the way that a child is formed and develops. There is something beautiful, amazing, and worshipful when a healthy baby is born into the world. It declares that God is real, life is a gift, and God is glorious. We are wonderfully made.

But this extends beyond birth. Throughout our lives the creative genius of God continues to unfold as personality, appearance, and gifts emerge. And while some of who we become is due to training and experiences, there is an imbedded imprint of the creator within every human. Humanity was meant to point us somewhere beyond ourselves.

Our family enjoyed watching the World Cup, especially while we were in the United Kingdom. We found ourselves glued to the television, thankful for no commercials, wishing players would take less "dives" and not wanting to miss any goal. It had been quite a while since I had watched soccer at that level, and I was stunned with the athleticism. The movement of their feet, the quick turns, and the way they could make the ball land with such precision was amazing. We found ourselves often saying, "How can they do that?" or "How can their bodies move that way?" We would often be stunned with what the human body could do. And that stunning reality is meant to point us back to the Creator. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

### **2) We are image-bearers (Gen. 1:26-28)**

The "other-worldly" reality of who we are as human beings is what the Bible calls being an image bearer. Gen. 1:27 says it this way:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Gen. 1:27 (ESV)

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It is an all-encompassing term that includes the following:

- Something divine: We are created as conduits that point, at some level, to what God is like.
- Something different: We are unique from the rest of the created order.
- Something dependent: We are not in the image of ourselves; we are an image of someone else – God.
- Something delightful: The expression of our human uniqueness is a joy-filled reminder of the goodness and kindness of God.
- Something distorted: Sin has marred the image of God, and we see this most clearly when we use our “image-bearer” status for ourselves, in a lack of love for others, or in our attempt to live independently from God.
- Something destined: the hope of the future is that through redemption in Jesus the distorted image will one day be made perfect. 1 John 3:2 says, “. . . when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.”

To be an image bearer is to reflect the image of God. Our gifts reflect His gifts. Our talents reflect His. Our beauty reflects His. And while we may do amazing things, achieve phenomenal results, or look stunningly beautiful, we are echoes of what is truly amazing and eternally lovely. Here is how Steve DeWitt, in his book *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything*, captures this truth as it relates to everything beautiful in creation:

*Beauty was created by God for a purpose: to give us the experience of wonder. And wonder, in turn, is intended to lead us to the ultimate human expression and privilege: worship. Beauty is both a gift and a map. It is a gift to be enjoyed and a map to be followed back to the source of the beauty with praise and thanksgiving.<sup>3</sup>*

So, there is nothing wrong with being gifted or gorgeous. The most beautiful thing about who you are is not ultimately a statement about you; it is a reflection of the very image of God.

### **3) The body is important (1 Cor. 6:19-20)**

Throughout church history there has been a tendency to not think very much or not value the physical realm. Part of this is due to the emphasis in the Scriptures on the inner-life, the soul, and the “spiritual.” The early church faced this issue head-on with the teaching of the Gnostics who believed that the soul was the only aspect of humanity that really mattered, that the physical realm was inconsequential. The effect was a world-view or script that easily justified all manner of excess and immorality, especially sexual immorality. The body, either your own or another’s, simply became a conduit for whatever one desired.

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<sup>3</sup> Steve DeWitt, *Eyes Wide Open: Enjoying God in Everything*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Credo House Publishers, 2012), 90.

The apostle Paul addresses this issue in 1 Corinthians 6 by elevating the importance of the body in three ways: 1) By highlighting the historical significance of the resurrection and reminding the readers that salvation involves a very real physical aspect – “God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power” (1 Cor. 6:14), 2) By linking the presence of Christ to what we do with our bodies – “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor. 6:15), and 3) By identifying our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit – “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Paul clearly wanted us to know that the body, and what we do with it, matters.

The point here is simply to realize that we probably have not thought enough about a theology of the body and beauty. If I were to ask you what the “script” of the world is as it relates to beauty, what is attractive, and what we should do with our bodies, you probably could tell me pretty easily. But I would guess that many of us do not think about beauty or the body through a theological lens.

The result of this can be two extremes. On the one hand, you could have people who are not good stewards of their bodies, who diminish the spiritual importance of caring for the body or who internally justify negligence or excess because of the belief that spirituality is what really counts. On the other hand, there are people who downplay the moral issues and justify promiscuity, immodesty, or lust because it is “just the body.” Paul would have us understand that the body is very important to God.

#### **4) We must focus on more than the physical (1 Tim. 4:8)**

By now you can see that the Bible is more in favor of the physical realm, the body, and what it means to be human than we probably realize. However, it needs to be balanced because of the amount of time, energy, effort, and money that we spend on caring for our bodies and beauty.

In 1 Timothy 4 Paul is making the case that we should “train ourselves for godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7). He is exhorting spiritual leaders to work hard in the service of Jesus Christ, and he compares the value of physical training to spiritual training.

“for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” 1 Tim. 4:8 (ESV)

His point is not that physical training is worthless, despite the fact that the KJV translates verse 8 as “exercise profiteth little.” Rather, he is saying that if athletes work hard and train the body, the servant of Jesus ought to have the same mindset when it comes to godliness. The point here is simply that while the body is good and physical training is good, godliness is even better. The physical body is decaying because of brokenness of our world, and it awaits the resurrection. It is good, but it is dying. Therefore, we should be sure that we focus on more than just the body. We need to keep both the physical and the spiritual life in mind.

This is good place for us to pause and ask ourselves how we are doing with this balance. Our natural tendency is to focus on the care of the body and even our appearance. Think how much time it took you to get ready for church today. How much was your mind occupied with how you looked, with what

others would think, and with what impression you would give? While there is nothing wrong with this at one level, it can become an obsession or simply a thought that crowds out other thoughts about God, His glory, and with having a prepared heart for worship.

When you are focused on your appearance, it hinders your ability to worship. Sarah Miller, in a great article in *Christianity Today* entitled “Why Pastors Should Preach About Body Image” makes this insightful comment:

*Countless women prepare for worship on Sunday morning, not by quieting their hearts and minds before the Lord, but by putting on makeup, curling their hair, and squeezing into a pair of Spanx. These women then walk into church, distracted and insecure, comparing themselves to the women around them, and wondering if they measure up. Focusing on God is a battle.*

*I cannot speak to the experience of men, but studies show that men fight this battle too. Images of six-pack abs, athletic builds, trendy clothes, and perfectly styled hair are all over the media.<sup>4</sup>*

The challenge is to not neglect the body but also to not let it become the center. The challenge here is simply for you to ask yourself if your perspective on appearance is in check.

## **5) Beauty is more than externals (1 Pet. 3:3-4)**

One of the most important texts in the Bible on the subject of beauty is found in 1 Peter 3, and it highlights “imperishable beauty.” Peter’s point in this passage is to help us understand what true beauty is all about. Here is what he 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. 1 Pet. 3:3–4 (ESV)*

I do not think that this text is against the external elements of beauty. Rather, Peter wants his readers to understand that there is beauty that goes far beyond the hairstyle, jewelry, or clothing. Instead, he wants the focus to be on the “hidden person of the heart.”

But the point is not just about “being pretty on the inside.” Peter offers us something of far greater value: a beauty that is imperishable and is precious in God’s sight. He offers us something more. He highlights the real beauty of godliness expressed through a gentle and quiet spirit. He is talking about an attractiveness that comes from who you are, not just what you look like.

Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone who was attractive on the outside but ugly on the inside? Maybe you remember going out on a date with someone who you thought was promising, only to be totally appalled at what was coming out of his or her mouth. Maybe you were in a relationship with someone who seemed great at first, but the closer you became, the more concerned you were because there was something missing. Or maybe you bought the lie that physical attractiveness is all

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2014/july/why-pastors-should-preach-about-body-image.html?>

that really matters. Solomon warned his son about the “bait and switch” of this kind of person in Proverbs 5.

*For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol; she does not ponder the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it.  
Proverbs 5:3–6 (ESV)*

Or maybe you have met someone who, despite their age or their physical limitations, had a spirit about her or a graciousness about him that was compelling and winsome. There is a beauty about that person that transcended age or physical qualities.

Peter would have us realize that beauty is so much more than appearances and attractiveness. There is a beauty that transcends externals. God offers to us an imperishable beauty while we live in perishable bodies.

How we look and our appearance to others are powerful emotions, and we can quickly attach our identity to appearance. But the Bible offers a vision of the body as something good, even though it is fallen, and a vision of being an image bearer, even though we imperfectly reflect the glory of God. The Bible offers us a vision of physical beauty as a gift from a beautiful God, and it helps us to see that there is an unfading beauty that relates to our relationship with Him. Physical beauty and what people think about us are powerful emotions, but they are like every other script in life that is contrary to God’s script – initially attractive but ultimately unsatisfying and meaningless.

The problem is that how you look will never ultimately satisfy you because there will always be someone more attractive, some part of your body that could be better, an airbrushed image that taunts you, or someone else who seems to have what you lack – at least to you. Building your identity in how you look is a never-ending cycle of self-consumption. And yet we were made for more.

*Physical beauty is a shadow. Food is a shadow. The security of money is a shadow. Health is a shadow. Family is a shadow. We long for a relationship with someone greater than us, and we settle for cheap substitutes — race-car drivers and football players and movie stars admired from afar. But the real desirability is found in Christ. God made every created beauty in this world as an expression of Christ’s beauty and the beauty of the Father’s love for the Son. All beauty is a breadcrumb path that leads us to Christ.<sup>5</sup>*

### **Implications Related to Identity and Beauty**

How does this issue of identity and beauty relate to where we live, how we think about ourselves, and how we do life and ministry?

Let me conclude by giving you some things to think about:

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<sup>5</sup> DeWitt, 107.

## **1. There is more work to do on a biblical view of beauty and the body**

I must admit that I have not done enough thinking on this subject, and I would be one of those pastors who has not spoken on this subject very often. And the more I read and thought about this, the more important it has become. The cultural script on this issue is loud and pervasive. And we need to offer a more compelling narrative that is rooted in the gospel, and that points people to the beauty of Christ.

## **2. We need to create the right appetite for beauty**

Solomon wisely gave his sons warnings about the fleeting attractiveness of the forbidden woman, and it seems that we ought to think about how to do the same for our children. If we do not wade into these waters, dialogue with our kids, and speak into this issue, they will learn a script that is unbalanced, unhealthy, and ungodly. We need to ask ourselves what messages we send and what values our kids catch from watching us.

But this also goes to what we define as attractive and appealing. Our over-imaged and over-photo-shopped culture has created an unrealistic and (frankly) ugly vision of what beauty really is. We need to reshape what we mean by “beautiful.”

## **3. We need to affirm, celebrate, and invest in the internal beauty of godliness**

If we really treasure godliness, then we ought to praise it when we see it, celebrate it when it bears fruit, and invest in it. What do I mean by invest in it? I mean to make the sacrifice of time and effort and money that it takes for godliness to become a part of your life. Godliness does not just happen. And maybe it needs to be higher on our priority list.

## **4. We need to help people who are fighting the internal battle with how they look**

The church should be a safe place for people who have been told that they are not wanted, ugly, or have been rejected. I can imagine that there are many people in our church today who still bear the scars of hurtful words and comparisons. My hope is that you could find some rest for your soul today knowing that your ultimate identity does not rest in what you look like but in who you are in Christ. And that you would come to see the real power of what it means to be “in Christ.”

My hope is that you can see that your ultimate identity does not come from what you look like, but from whom you look to. In looking to Christ, you become like Him. And there is nothing more beautiful or attractive than Him.

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