
Your Looks: What the Voices Say and the Images Portray

by David Powlison

One of the most conspicuous obsessions in our culture is the quest for physical beauty. Concern about what we look like pervades our social relationships and seduces us all, men and women both, to some degree or other. The typical impact of culture is like the effects of air pollution: what you inhale tends to slowly and steadily alter you. Our culture besieges us with voices that comment on what we look like, what we ought to look like, and the blessings and curses that presumably attend success or failure. Our mass media culture silently beguiles us with images of the same. Television, magazines, and movies teach which “look” is to be valued and which “look” is to be stigmatized. We are taught “good and evil” regarding our appearance by what we hear and see.

This came home vividly to me several years ago when I watched a half-hour “infomercial” targeting men who suffered male-pattern baldness. While flipping between a baseball game and the international news, I was arrested by the infomercial being presented on the channel in between, and I settled down to watch the entire thing.

Bald Lies

I was introduced to a man in his early thirties with a “hang dog” look. His life was not cutting it. He wore ill-fitting clothes, ten years out of date. His face had a pasty look. His eyes were furtive and

ashamed, and dark, puffy circles under his eyes accentuated the unwholesome impression he made. Long, thin strands of hair from the side of his head were combed up over the top in a wholly unsuccessful attempt to cover his baldness.

I soon learned that he was depressed. He talked about how his self-esteem had plummeted in recent years as he had lost his hair and his youthful appearance. He hadn’t had a date in months, so his weekends were lonely. He was a salesman, but business had been bad. He hadn’t been making sales, so his weekdays were an exercise in frustration. The underlying cause of all his problems? His progressive baldness.

The clincher was that he used to love to go to the beach, but didn’t dare go anymore. When he would come out of the water, the strands of hair with which he attempted to hide his baldness would either plaster over the top of his bald head or would smear down over his ears and his neck. The effect—illustrated before my wondering eyes—was loathsome.

The camera then shifted to the sales representative for the show’s sponsor. He had a full head of well-groomed hair, and explained in articulate detail a new hair restoration procedure that could solve the problems of male-pattern baldness. An 800 number flashed on the screen, where operators were standing by to sign up all who called in.

Finally, the show returned to the man

who had previously told his “before” story. The “after” story was a glowing testimony, portraying a man made new. He now looked like Mr. Hair. A black-and-white “before” picture was displayed next to the video of a tanned, confident man with a full head of hair. He was wearing the latest clothes, well cut. His shoulders were squared; he stood tall and looked listeners in the eye. He said he’d never felt better about himself. He’d been on a winning streak in sales lately, and was in the running for salesman of the year. His social life? Words could not adequately describe it.

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Instead, I watched him running down the beach with not one, but *two* girls in bathing suits, one on each arm! A new head of hair had done all this for him. The final scene of the testimonial showed him diving into the waves and coming up out of the water with his mane of glory glistening. He had left his problems behind, and exuded life and vigor.

As I watched all this I thought, “They’re kidding, right? This is a comedy sketch from *Saturday Night Live*, previewing in prime time.” But it was no spoof. Somebody was paying for that half hour of commercial TV time. That 800 number must have attracted enough customers to make the whole business profitable. Both voice and image had driven home this message: “If you have hair on the top of your head, you will be successful and happy. You’ll have a social life that won’t quit, and you’ll make money.” At one level, the whole thing seemed silly. But it worked. It communicated. It captured the hopes, fears, dreams, and frustrations of people willing to make that call and pay money.

Hooking the Heart

That infomercial provides a not-very-subtle example of the way that beguiling voices and images work. Notice that whether the approach is subtle or grotesque, the beguilement must appeal to something already resident in the human heart. The TV show cannot make me believe its message or make me dial the 800 number. Its particular package of lies must excite and pander to cravings of the flesh already resident in the human heart: in this case, cravings for popularity, intimacy, happiness, money, carefree freedom, the fountain of youth. It plays to the tendency of

the fallen human heart to believe “the lie,” as that lie comes in a thousand different forms. An analysis of the lies that beguile people will always lead you to the human heart that is ready to believe and desire those lies. If you want to expose the lies in order to bring liberating truth, learn to dig out that mosaic of false faiths and felt needs that drives people into bondage.

Notice also the way that false voices and images always define—misdefine—good and evil, success and failure, value and stigma. Whether you are dealing with “peer pressure,” with “media influences,” or with (to put it more technically) “processes of enculturation and socialization,” the key to understanding is to drag the lie into the open. Enculturating lies usurp the functions of God’s truth. They promise blessing and warn of curses. They define “good” (in this case, as cranial hair). They define “evil” (as a bald pate). If only you can attain the good, then you will obtain the blessing. Bald-headed “sinners” have only themselves to blame for their misery. The lie creates a false vision of life and death, meaning and futility, happiness and unhappiness. To help people correct their distorted vision, show them how they have been molded by their context of persuasive images and voices.

Beauty Standards in the Global Village

In this particular area—“What do you look like?”—women typically have it even tougher than men. Women are bombarded with voices saying that your looks define you as a person. The mass media culture has had a huge impact here. The temptation to be preoccupied with physical appearance has always existed, but today the vehicles of temptation are far more intense and intentional. Women in the 1890s might have compared themselves with the other ten girls their age in the village. Women in the 1990s must compare themselves with pictures of the cream of the worldwide modeling industry. The images peer out from *every* magazine cover: men’s magazines teach men what to look *for*, and women’s magazines teach women what to look *like*. The image is the same on all the covers, whoever the intended audience. That image defines value and stigma, and has a wildly destructive effect. Consider the ingredients in the value system set forth before our eyes.

First, it says that you must basically be perfect and without defect, however that is defined. A whole group of women are stigmatized immediately. One happens to be a Thalidomide baby and has no right arm below the elbow. Another has a port-wine birthmark on her face, or a cleft palate. Another has a scar on her face from when she pulled a pot of boiling

water onto herself as a four-year-old; another walks with a limp from cerebral palsy. Cursed! No good! Failure! This value system exhibits the classic contours of temptation: dangle the bait and hide the hook. It says, "If you look like this, you'll be happy." But then the curse comes in and dismisses a whole sector of femalekind as defective.

Second, the value system prescribes a certain shape, the dimensions of face and figure. What if your ears stick out, or your nose is pointy, or you're shaped more like a pear than a Barbie doll? Then you're a failure, even though that's the way God made you. You're "supposed to" look like something that fits the

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"ideal" shape, an ideal that promises blessing. But immediately another large percentage of women is cursed.

Third, this "look," this "image," these voices that tell women what they're supposed to look like, do more than devalue the way God made you. They also presume that you have leisure and money. You need the money to be able to follow the latest fashion trends; you need the leisure to be able spend time cultivating the look. There is no way to match up to the image if you're a mother of pre-schoolers who has stayed up all night with a sick child. Looking tired and a bit frazzled doesn't cut it. There's no way you can have "dishpan hands." You can't sweat for a living. There's no way you can work in a factory or a field. "The look" implies wealth, leisure, and servants – people to buff your nails, put emollients on your face, and look after the children! Again the blessings of the ideal turn into curses for those who fall short: most of humankind.

Fourth, the ideal has a strong racial bias built into it, too. This will vary from culture to culture, but each culture tends to elevate the looks of one particular ethnic group and to despise other groups. American culture typically reveals a Caucasian bias. People from Asian, Hispanic, or Black backgrounds who become prominent in the media tend to have fundamentally Caucasian features. For example, Connie Chung is Chinese, but her face is not classically Asian; it maps onto a Caucasian facial structure. African-American models such as Iman, Naomi Campbell, and Tyra Banks are exotic variations on Caucasian ideals of beauty rather than typically Negroid. It's rare to see

Blacks in the media with fundamentally Negroid features; Oprah Winfrey is an exception, but she is on television for her personality rather than her beauty. Such racial biases have the same effect as every other component of the ideal: millions of women are immediately stigmatized by the values in which we are immersed every day.

A fifth aspect of the false standard brings a curse to every woman in the end: the years of physical attractiveness extend from fifteen to thirty-five or forty. Inevitably the crow's feet appear around the corners of the eyes; the brow gets furrows; the inexorable effects of gravity, aging, and childbirth cause things to sag that didn't used to sag. Elizabeth Taylor can subject herself to uncounted lifts, tucks, and cosmetic alterations, but the sixteen-year-old girl of *National Velvet* is no more and never will be again. The body starts to look old and nothing can reverse it. Even women who succeed against the cultural ideal can do so for only a short window of time. Someday everyone who lives long enough will look like Grandma or Great-Grandma: old, wrinkly, white-haired, frail, bent. You're in a race against time in which everyone loses. If you buy the value system, someday you'll be cursed no matter what. This is a perfect illustration of the way false images and voices work. They beguile us, dazzle us; we believe them, long for the blessings they promise and fear their threats; they control us; and finally they kill us.

The Impossible Dream

I was once talking about these things in a group when a woman spoke up and said, "I have something else to add to your list. I used to work in the fashion industry in New York. Do you know that even the models don't look like their pictures? When we got a photograph of a model for a magazine cover, we put it in the computer and reworked her picture. We lengthened the jaw line, gave the cheeks a slight hollow, slimmed the thighs and hips, creating someone who never existed. When I'd actually meet a model in real life, she'd look sort of squat and dumpy compared to what she looked like on the magazine cover!"

On the magazine cover she looked like a Barbie doll. In real life she looked like a person. Think about the incongruity. Millions of women look in the mirror and compare themselves to an ideal face and figure, and they are haunted by the ways they come up short. But even the models themselves don't really look like that! It's the ultimate deception. This woman then added one more telling comment. She said, "It is becoming increasingly popular in some parts of the fashion industry to use male transvestites to model

women's clothing in live shows. Certain male body types tend to have no hips, while females tend to have larger hips. The men have the ultimate lean look we wanted to promote for women." In its ultimate perversion, the lie urges women to whip their bodies into a shape that can't be attained by their gender!

A few other observations can drive this all home. These standards vary widely from culture to culture. Many American women are depressed and dominated by what they look like, but in another culture their "flaws" might be their greatest asset. In Third World cultures, for example, the value system often tends more towards largeness as an ideal. Big is high status, and skinny is low status, because big means you have food whereas skinny connotes poverty. Your *bulk*, not your slimness, reveals that you've got wealth and leisure. When I was in Uganda as a short-term missionary, there was a woman on the team who was fairly attractive by American cultural standards. She said that out in the villages, Ugandan grandmothers would come up to her and pinch her arms and shake their heads: "You poor girl, doesn't your husband have enough money to feed you? Is your father poor? Doesn't your husband love you? Why are you so skinny? You look like a chicken!" The same values are more formalized in Tonga. There the ideal feminine beauty weighs 300 pounds. Big means you have a husband rich enough to stuff you with breadfruit, poi, fish, and papayas. Such cross-cultural observations reveal the lies in other cultures that parallel those in our own culture. It helps us detach a bit and realize how wrong it is to have our hearts manipulated by the particular set of images and voices that assail us. "Success" or "failure" are often accidents of birthplace.

Finally, these standards are also historically variable. Even in America in the twentieth century, there have been major shifts in the ideal body type. In the 1920s the beanpole "flapper" look was all the rage. By the 1940s, the ideal woman looked like she had stepped out of a Rubens painting, with plenty of flesh on the bones. In the 1990s, women who fit the '40s ideal would be considered fat! In this case, "success" and "failure" are accidents of birthday. Perfection has a shelf life, and eventually gets replaced with a new model. By the 1980s and '90s Americans began to aspire after an impossible image, a Barbie doll. As we've seen, real people don't look like that – unless silicone, liposuction, and surgery intervene.

Slavery to the Standard

We've sought to analyze the false standards of beauty that invite our loyalty. What happens when someone embraces such values? They live out the

logic of their faith in countless ways. Perhaps most common, many women feel an abiding, low-grade anxiety about their appearance. It might manifest as subtly as spending an unnecessary extra couple of minutes in front of the mirror trying to fix what seems unacceptable... or stewing internally in regrets and "if onlys." Mental or actual tinkering with appearance can chew up amazing amounts of time and energy. Or perhaps upon walking into the fellowship hall after church, a woman is instantly aware of what every other woman is wearing, and has sized up how she compares. Her very gaze at other people is condi-

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tioned to a status hierarchy defined by images of beauty, and thus to the attendant jealousy, self-loathing, competitiveness, inferiority/superiority comparisons, and the like. Perhaps she obsessively pursues alterations in her appearance: hair color, weight loss, new clothing, make-up, cosmetic operations. Perhaps she slides into an "eating disorder." Perhaps she plunges into despair and gives up, gaining 100 pounds, becoming unkempt, "uglifying" herself. "I'm a failure" simply registers a different manifestation of devotion to the lie. All such preoccupations rob her of the joy and freedom of faith in Christ the Lord, and sap energies that might be spent in loving concern for others.

The Word of God speaks extensively to such issues of "enculturation," of slavery to the falsely prophetic images and voices generated by the world and its systems of distorted value and stigma. In several places Scripture singles out the issue of beauty in a pointed way. Proverbs 31:10-31 portrays the true beauty of fearing, trusting, and loving the Lord our Redeemer. It comments on charm's deceitfulness and beauty's emptiness. The true and enduring beauty of character, peaceableness, wisdom, trust, and love breathes forth from those proverbs. First Peter 3:1-6 similarly redefines beauty. It contrasts the cultural image ("external adornment") with the true and imperishable image of God in the heart. True beauty is fearless; it can never be ravaged by time or affliction; it can never be made insecure. This is a kind of beauty that can be more

radiant at ninety than at eighteen; it improves rather than deteriorates with age.

An Alternate Image

The Word of God abounds with wonderful passages intended to renew minds and hearts, causing us to serve and aim for a different image. Isaiah 44, for example, illustrates one way Scripture helps us deal with the idolatrous lies that beg for our loyalty. Isaiah critiques false worship by mocking the idols. He says, "Can you believe it? A guy cuts down a tree and saws it in two. Half of it he carves into a god, and bows down in worship. The other half he chops up and uses as firewood to cook his dinner. This is stupid!" Psalm 115 is similar. It says, "Why do you serve gods that aren't gods? They have mouths, but can't talk. They have hands, but they can't do anything. They can't bless you. They can't curse you. Why serve lies? Why serve dead, impotent things? You could serve a living God who works, walks, sees, talks. Serve this God!" Exposing and mocking the idols is one way to help liberate people from their hold. The flip side is loving and admiring God. God exposes false things for what they are, so people are freed to worship the One who is truly beautiful and glorious and admirable. In both Isaiah 44 and Psalm 115, shouts of joy in God replace the slavery, superstition, and delusion of false worship.

One of my intentions in this article is to help liberate people from the images and voices that deceive so many regarding their looks. The previous pages expose characteristics of the beauty lie that reveal how absurd and self-defeating it actually is. We aren't making fun of people. We're mocking the empty things that trap them, so that people made in the image of God would become free to pursue God's image and voice joyously and energetically. Why waste time with trifles that only disappoint and condemn, when substantive things are full of solid and lasting joy?

The Blossoming of Faith

My wife and I have been privileged to watch women transformed in this area. One friend had been in as much bondage to her appearance as anyone I've known. She had problems with eating disorders for many years; since adolescence she had never gone out in public without make-up, without "putting on her face," as she put it. She would look in the mirror ten or fifteen times before going out of the house. In any group situation she was highly self-conscious, continually comparing herself with other women and worrying about what men thought of her.

As God started to break the hold of the lie, her life

began to blossom, and sweet, visible fruit emerged. Her faith in Christ prospered; her joy about the Savior who had forgiven her and was delivering her from idolatry was evident. She started to become interested in other people; she began to reach out in love instead of being consumed with anxiety and self-preoccupation.

One evening she came over for dinner to our home, and towards the end of dinner made a comment: "Did you notice anything? I'm not wearing make-up. It's the first time I haven't worn make-up in public in almost twenty years." That was one step of living faith among many that she took. She went on to explain that God had convicted her that she really ought to only look in the mirror twice: the first time to get her appearance in basic order; the second time to make sure she hadn't overlooked anything as she walked out the door. She spoke of how her goals in social situations were also changing. Before she would go into the fellowship hall at church or into work in the morning, she would simply ask God to show her whom to love and how to do it.

The fruits of righteousness show up in such details: freedom from the "need" for make-up, reduced mirror time, a changed agenda in social situations. This woman's life gave a wonderful picture of the detailed way in which redemption works out into the details of our lives. She bore specific good fruit, tailor-made for her in her situation with her particular struggles.

Various bad fruits express a preoccupation with physical appearance: self-consciousness, fantasy, brooding, eating disorders, despair, invidious comparisons with others, out-of-control consumer spending, dissatisfaction with oneself and others. To help, make sure you look in four directions. First, expose the lies that beset the person. Help them to see the influences that they inhale regularly and unconsciously, like inhaling invisible, polluted air. Second, expose the heart that believes those lies and craves that false image. The world's deceits find fertile soil within, and change must begin there. Third, show the beauty and glory of the grace of Christ. He has come to forgive and set free those enslaved in darkness. The beauty trap is one major area of His liberating activity in our modern culture of mass media images, manipulative advertising, and a fashion industry. Fourth, show the way forward into practical changes, into redirected priorities, into a lifestyle of love rather than self-preoccupation. Our culture's conspicuous obsessions are the very places where the beauty of Christ shines most brightly.