

Adorned with good deeds

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[0 : 00] I wonder what it is for you that makes church a place that you want to be. Or perhaps if you're here under protest, what would make it a place that you want to be?

Or negatively, what would mean church was not a place that you want to be? Our passage this evening addresses that second question, if you like.

Paul talks here about two problems that were making the church in Ephesus an unpleasant place to be. Some people in the church behaving in ways that made it a toxic environment for others, and so he weighs in.

He's continuing in these verses to lay out this blueprint for church life. In the previous verses, the first part of what we read there, he's explained that there should be that universal call to all people, that we don't have any right to exclude anyone from our prayers, because the salvation that God offers is not restricted to a certain kind of people.

He's thereby condemned the false teachers who wanted to limit salvation to Jews who kept the law. And he continues in these verses, and on past the end of tonight's passage, to describe what the worshiping life of the church ought to look like, what should characterize the assembly of God's people.

[1 : 26] And first of all, he returns to the topic of prayer in verse 8. So our first heading this evening, Praying Men. He writes, Therefore I want the men everywhere to pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or disputing.

We need to unpack this a little bit. There's a few dead ends that we might end up heading down, so let's mark those off, and then we can get to where Paul's trying to go.

First dead end, don't be fooled by the phrasing, I want. Paul isn't expressing here a vague, idle wish. In fact, he is laying down an apostolic command. This is what Paul the Apostle wants.

The force here is the same as I urge, back in verse 1, and the same language is used in legal writing at the time, describing things that absolutely must be done.

Maybe this is like when you want your kids to come and sit down nicely at the table, and you say, I want you to come and sit down and eat now. Or even, would you like to come and have tea now?

[2 : 31] It's not really optional, is it? This is what will happen. This isn't idle. This is Paul ordering by apostolic authority what will take place. Second dead end, Paul addresses this to men, doesn't he?

Now, from 1 Corinthians chapter 11, we know Paul doesn't have a problem with women praying in church, so why does he address men here? Well, I think because they're the ones particularly guilty of the sin that he is correcting.

We'll come back to that, but let's not go down the line of thinking that this means only men should pray in church. Third dead end, third possible diversion.

This is everywhere. This is for the people in every place. Now, Paul is writing to Timothy. He's writing to the church in Ephesus. So maybe he just means all of the different places where the church gathered.

Maybe he means when they meet together all in one place and when they meet together in smaller groups on different homes in other occasions, that this applies in all of those situations.

[3 : 37] I think that is true, but I think it's also more than that. Because remember in the previous verses, in verses 1 to 7, just how universal those were, how over and over again he kept repeating that language of all.

He was talking about praying for all people, wasn't he? So here he is addressing a particular problem in a particular place, but he's also bearing in mind and using that language of everywhere, he's bearing in mind a broader application of what he says.

And so what Paul says to these men in Ephesus applies to you and me in New Mills. Fourthly, lifting up holy hands.

Was I sinning earlier when I prayed because I had my hands at my side or probably holding on to the edges of the lectern or whatever it is that I was doing? When I raised my hands at the end of the service and pronounced the benediction, is that the one proper prayer?

No, of course this is not the case. The Bible talks about many different postures of bodies and arms in the Bible of different ways that people pray. We can't possibly say that Paul is here saying this is the only proper way to pray.

[4 : 48] It does seem like standing with arms lifted, probably face up, palms up like this. It seems like that probably was the default position for prayer in the first century, but it certainly wasn't the only one.

So why mention lifting up hands? Because Paul wants to call those hands holy. And here we're getting to the point. So the point Paul is making isn't about the place, it isn't about who prays, it isn't about how they stand.

The point he's making, I suggest, is that the hands need to be holy. What does that mean? I think we're meant to have in the back of our minds passages like Psalm 24.

Psalm 24 verse 3 asks, Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

Who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false guard? Now, ultimately, hands are neither clean nor unclean, neither holy or unholy.

[5 : 54] God's concern isn't really with whether you've scrubbed the engine oil off your hands or whatever it is that might be besmirching them. Psalm 24 puts these clean hands in parallel with a pure heart and puts that in parallel with not trusting an idol.

And I think this pushes us a fair way towards what Paul means here by talking about holy hands. That the one who has holy hands is the one who trusts in God and not in an idol.

The one who has holy hands is the one who has the right attitude in their mind. And he clarifies, doesn't he, what attitude he has in mind, particularly here.

The end of the verse, without anger or disputing. So what Ephesians sin is Paul correcting here? How is he rebuking these false teachers who are leading people astray?

These people with that leadership position in the church. These people who would have had every right to stand in the assembly and pray. How is he rebuking them? He says their prayers are marked by anger and disputing.

[7 : 02] What could be more unpleasant, what could be more repugnant than coming before God in prayer, than coming into the throne room of God, than coming to the one who graciously welcomes us to bring our prayers and petitions.

What could be more wrong, what could be more despicable than using that moment to express your anger and to fight your battles with those around you?

That is not what prayer is for. The purpose of prayer is not to advance my agenda at the expense of other people, is it? Kenneth Ross came from New Pruswick Baptist Church and took our prayer meeting on Friday night.

Say he extends a return invitation and during the time of prayer when I've gone there to lead a prayer meeting for them, say I stand up and pray. God, thank you for the privilege of baptizing little Habakkuk last week.

Thank you, God, that you relate to us as whole families and you clearly invite us to mark our children with the sign of your covenant. If I go and do that in a Baptist church, that is not respectful, is it?

[8 : 09] That is not a right use of a time of prayer. However convinced I might be of that theological position, if it is a controversial point in that context, then prayer is not the time to argue my case, is it?

Now, probably none of us are likely to be that obvious, that blatant about it, but we do do it a bit more subtly, don't we?

When we pray about political situations, isn't there a risk there that we do so in a way that equates our political inclinations with God's will?

Now, that is not honoring to God. That is not respectful to our fellow believers who might differ with us. And he doesn't just talk about disputing, does he?

He isn't only talking about using the time of prayer to advance their agenda. He also talks about praying without anger. I don't think he just means they shouldn't pray in an angry tone.

[9 : 12] I don't think he means they should brush it under the carpet for a bit and pray as if they were brothers. I think he means they should resolve their anger. Ephesians 4, 26, In your anger do not sin.

Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. I think his intention is that they will resolve the anger that they have with one another before they come to pray together.

This links in, doesn't it, with that passage we were looking at this morning that goes on from where we focused earlier to point out in verse 20, Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar.

For whoever does not love their brother and sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. John is very clear as he writes that that we need to love one another.

That it is a nonsense to think that we can love God without loving one another. And that means it is a nonsense to pray loving God if we are hating one another, if we are angry with one another, if we are disputing with one another.

[10 : 22] It is a nonsense to think that we can come to God in prayer with that attitude. So, God cares about how we pray.

That's probably not very surprising, is it, that God cares about how we pray? We know God has rules for worship and so on. But perhaps more surprisingly, as we come to verses 9 and 10, God cares about how we dress.

So, ladies, if you've ever got up on a Sunday morning and wondered what shall I put on today, now is the time to listen up. I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

There's a few things to pick out here and the first one is a really positive thing, that the also, at the start of that verse, that picks up the I want from verse 8, which, remember, we said has the force of a command from an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does Paul want women to do? Well, dress there in the NIV. that isn't actually translating a verb from the Greek. The first verb we get is adorning. And so the skeleton, the outline of the sentence is, women, adorn yourselves.

[11 : 48] John Stott says, when a woman adorns herself, she is seeking to enhance her beauty. So Paul recognizes both that women are beautiful and that they should increase and exhibit their beauty.

There is no biblical warrant in these verses for women to neglect their appearance, conceal their beauty, or become dowdy and thrumpish. Good Englishman.

Ladies, the Bible does not say that you should dress in sackcloth. It does not say you should not wish to be beautiful. It does not say you should deny or play down or seek to diminish or hide the beauty with which God has blessed you.

It does not say that. Adorn yourselves. And three things hang off that basic instruction. Firstly, verse 9, this adornment is to be modest, decent, and proper.

There is a difference, isn't there, between clothing which adorns and clothing which is immodest. There is a difference between enhancing and accentuating your beauty and enhancing and accentuating your allure.

[13 : 01] enjoying beauty is not the same as inciting lust. Your dress should be modest, decent, and proper. I have no intention of trying to specify this point in any greater detail.

If you don't know, ask your husband, ask your mother, ask a woman with greater maturity. Do not, under any circumstances, come and ask me, do you think this dress is modest? Do not do that.

A second thing hangs off this. And this one is a more negative one, if you like, at the end of verse 9. Not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.

I want to treat this in two separate chunks. We'll leave the expensive clothes for a moment. Elaborate hairstyles or more literally braided hair, gold, and pearls. Are you really not allowed to plait your hair to come to church?

Do you all need to go home and throw away your golden wedding rings? No, probably not. After all, the Bible elsewhere speaks about these things in positive terms.

[14 : 06] Gold is brought as a gift for Jesus. Revelation 21 describes a city of gold in the new creation that has gates made out of pearls. The woman in the Song of Songs has beautiful hair.

So what is going on here? What is Paul getting at? Flick over with me if you would to Revelation chapter 17. In Revelation 17 and verse 3 we read, Then the angel carried me away in the spirit into a desert.

There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls.

She held a golden cup in her hand filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery. Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.

Do you see how that woman there in Revelation is dressed? With rich clothes and gold and precious stones and pearls. And who is she?

[15 : 33] Well, passages like this and plenty of other descriptions from other literature around the same time show us that these kind of descriptions, this is how a prostitute dresses. For the women in Ephesus to dress with elaborately braided hair entwined with gold and pearls is to signal their availability.

Whether they were married, whether they're some of the widows that we'll come to later in the letter, whether they're women not yet married, by dressing in this way they are advertising themselves. So if I can perhaps slightly crudely summarize this for today, don't dress like a slut.

We live in a society, don't we, that says to women, says to girls, you can wear whatever you want and if anyone disapproves then they are wrong. They are slut-shaming.

The feminism of yesterday used to say why should I wear uncomfortable things and high heels and outfits designed to make me look attractive to men? I am my own woman. But the feminism of today says you can wear whatever you want and anyone who tells you otherwise is misogynistic and repressed and only noticing you because they're not getting any at home and so on.

And if anyone dares to suggest that it is not particularly wise to dress in virtually nothing, well they are justifying rape culture and blaming the victims for the bad behavior of men.

[16 : 57] Yes, all men. Girls, I imagine the day will come if you are not already starting to feel it when your friends are going to suggest in word or in deed, when you are going to feel inclined on some level to rebel against the older generation by pushing these boundaries of what you can get away with.

The day will come I suspect when the idea of going out and watching men's eyes follow you down the street might be an attractive thing to you. It may not be a popular thing to say today but Paul is unembarrassed to say don't do that.

Don't dress like a slut. Absolutely for sure don't bring that anywhere near the church. He's talking primarily about that context here but it isn't any more appropriate for a Christian elsewhere, is it?

Stay with me. I'm going to make myself even more uncomfortable for a few moments because folks this isn't just an instruction for teenage girls, is it? Maybe that's where we see it most often today but it isn't exclusive.

I think too often there comes that point, there comes that voice whispering in the back of your mind at some stage that you hear that voice that's whispering that you are no longer attractive, that whatever beauty you once had has faded, that nobody could possibly find you attractive and there comes that inclination to respond to that voice by making it shut up, by showing that you are still attractive, by seeking out that admiring, lingering, glance, by seeking out the comment that notices your attractiveness, notices your femininity.

[18 : 44] Again, Paul says, don't do that. Have a bit more respect for yourself than that. Dress with modesty, decency, and propriety.

I suggest maybe the question that these things suggest you should be asking yourself, girls, ladies, is, what signals is this outfit sending?

Is this outfit designed to signal availability and desire? Our cultural background today doesn't say that gold jewelry is only for showing off and only for prostitutes, so you should feel free to wear gold, but the principle behind those specifics transfers across, doesn't it?

I said we'd come back to those expensive dresses. I think they highlight for us another dimension of what these women in Ephesus were trying to do. As well as dressing like prostitutes, they were also flaunting their wealth.

They were choosing the clothes that made their riches apparent. It's entirely possible, isn't it, for an outfit to be chaste and modest and decent and proper, but at the same time to be very obviously expensive.

[19 : 58] And to Paul's mind, that kind of ostentatious display of wealth is no more proper in church than the revealing immodest outfit. So if that first question that you ask yourself is what signals is the outfit sending, the second question to ask is how will this outfit make other people feel?

How will it make other women feel about themselves? If your outfit is going to make other people feel bad that they can't afford such nice clothes, then church probably isn't the place for that outfit.

Church is not an opportunity for you to show off. Again, I am not saying conceal your beauty, women, adorn yourselves, but not at the expense of others.

thirdly, the third thing that hangs off these verses, adorned with good deeds.

Verse 10, adorn yourself with good deeds appropriate for women who profess to worship God. He isn't just writing about what they ought not to wear, is he? Remember, we began with that positive, I want women to adorn themselves, and here he answers the question as to what they are to adorn themselves with.

[21 : 17] And he is then not thinking primarily about their outward appearance, but rather he is concerned with their inward attitude and how that overflows into their visible behavior.

Paul is ever clear that our behavior does not win us acceptance from God, but also clear here and in other places that our behavior is affected by that acceptance, that it flows from the fact that we have been accepted.

So good deeds as an expression of our salvation are every bit as much a part of Paul's theology as is the rejection of good deeds as the basis for salvation.

Paul is very happy to say you should have good deeds, you should behave in a certain way. And these good works that he's talking about here, with which they are to adorn themselves, aren't only the obedience of wearing modest attire, but also, more broadly, that broad spectrum of Christian obedience which springs from faith in Jesus.

Peter makes a very similar point in chapter 3 of his first letter. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes.

[22 : 31] Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit which is of great worth in God's sight.

I think the idea that Paul is trying to convey here goes something like this. If you want to be noticeable, don't be noticed for the way that you dress. Don't draw the eye with your provocative attire.

No, be noticed for how you behave. Be noticed for your good deeds. Whether you are beautiful or artist, is in many ways outside of your control, isn't it? But it is possible for any of us to adorn ourselves with good deeds.

That's not a question of natural gifting or even necessarily of inclination, but rather of how you choose to act. Just as with the men praying without anger and disputing, Paul's concern is that their inward beliefs will be shown by their outward behavior.

Men, if you have drifted off thinking that none of this applies to you, well now's the moment to refocus, because I think that this shift of priorities that Paul is commending to the women has implications for me and for you as well.

[23 : 54] Let me ask you this, how do you complement your wife? How do you complement your daughters, your mother, your Christian sisters? Because if you're like me, then your inclination is probably to notice first how she looks.

I think probably most days I tell Joanna that she's beautiful, and she is, and I should tell her that. But here is my challenge to me and my challenge to you. How often do I tell her that she is Christ-like?

How often do you compliment your wife on adorning herself not with elegant attire, but with good deeds? When she makes food to take to a friend who needs it, do you thank her for doing that?

Do you compliment that Christ-like behavior? When she helps somebody who's struggling to get up and down the steps outside of church, or struggling to find somewhere to sit, or just offers a listening ear to somebody who needs someone to talk to, do you compliment that behavior?

Since Joanna is here this evening, and since I don't do this often enough, I'm going to take this opportunity to embarrass her. It might well have been the big, bright purple trousers that first caught my eye back in 2003.

[25 : 12] You were. You continue to be beautiful to behold. But that is not what captivated me. What is it that was worth overcoming my shyness and my lack of experience?

Why did we stay together? Because I found in Joanna a woman with godly priorities. because I found someone whose attitudes and whose outlook align with mine. Because I found and I continue to find a woman who encourages me to be more Christ-like, even when that is sometimes painful for me to be encouraged that way.

Why? Because she is a woman who is willing to count others better than herself. Because she is someone who prioritizes caring for our family and caring for others over how she might wish to spend her time.

Does Joanna have beautiful dresses? She does. Does she from time to time dig down into the drawer and find the elegant necklace buried under the ones designed to cope with babies grabbing them and sucking on them?

She does. But it is not adorning herself in that way that makes her beautiful in my eyes. Enough of that particular embarrassment for all of us.

[26 : 24] But I know I don't say these things often enough and I suspect that neither do you. I hope that helps us to see what I mean when I encourage you to compliment your wife's Christ-like behavior.

And keep telling her she's beautiful too. So where do we land? Anger and disputing has no place in our prayer lives.

Immodest attire is not appropriate. We have these two different kinds of behavior which are profoundly inappropriate in church. Both of which are rooted in those wrong attitudes and wrong motivation.

Both of them rooted in selfishness, in trying to advance their own agenda, in trying to make themselves look great with the result of putting others down.

These men who are praying in a way that is designed to make other people feel stupid. Praying in a way that is designed to show that others are wrong and they are right.

[27 : 30] Women who dress in a way designed to entice men in and make other women feel lesser. What a sorry place this church in Ephesus had become.

May it not be so amongst us. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for your servant Paul.

We thank you for how you motivated him to write to this church, to write to Timothy, and to encourage right behavior in the church there, and through that to encourage it for us.

Lord, might we see these things, might we recognize how we are in danger of falling short in these areas. Lord, would you give us the grace, would you give us the confidence in the gospel that enables us to adorn ourselves with good deeds, instead of seeking to find validation in seeking to advance our own agenda in these ways that are not right amongst your people?

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.