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Loving the Skin You're In

How to believe in
your own beauty.



Loving the Skin You're In

How to believe in your own beauty.



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Introduction

The Skin I'm In

By *Marian V. Liautaud*



One morning as I got ready for work, my husband watched me put on blush and eyeliner. I always get nervous when he hovers like this. Dan's a purist; he thinks I'm prettier without make-up. Later that night, he asked me why I wear it.

"I like wearing make-up because I feel more finished—more put together—when I have on blush and mascara," I explained. "What do you think would happen if you didn't look put together?" he probed. "People at work might view me as unprofessional." Still not satisfied, he asked, "What do you think would happen if they viewed you as unprofessional? Do you think you could lose your job?"



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"No, probably not lose my job, but I might miss out on opportunities because I'd go unnoticed."

"Oh, so make-up helps you get noticed."

"I don't wear make-up to get noticed," I rebutted a little more defensively than I had intended. "It helps me look better, and when I feel like I look the best I can, I have more confidence, which in turn leads to more opportunities." I was getting tired of his questions—and uncomfortable. Still, he persisted.

"Oh, so making yourself look different than what you are gives you confidence."

As Dan tried to understand the psychology behind wearing make-up, his questions became needles that poked holes through my logic. Exasperated, I ended our conversation by saying, "I am annoyed by your questions, but they are making me realize that I don't have this issue sorted out in my own mind. I'm going to take our conversation to heart and try to figure this out."

The next day I embarked on a 30-day experiment. Without telling a soul, I committed to wearing no make-up to see what kind of reaction I would receive from the people in my life. I was sure coworkers would look at me and either judge my unfinished appearance with disapproval—maybe even disgust—or they would ask me if I was feeling sick.

The first week was the hardest. I avoided making eye contact with people. Every time I saw myself in a mirror, I instinctively reacted with disgust. "You look





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like a dog," I actually said to myself on more than one occasion. I felt so ugly and unattractive. I started to concentrate on smiling as much as I could and initiating conversations with people so I could learn more about them as a way of taking the focus off of me. I desperately wanted to get comfortable in my own skin. But how could I when I felt so ugly?

Somewhere during week two, I began to realize that how I look has nothing to do with me. I had nothing to say in the matter. At conception, God knit me together, weaving the DNA from my mom and dad into a little girl with brown hair and blue eyes. My chin comes from my grandma, unchiseled and prone to doubling, and my nose might be a bit too big for my face. At what point had I started to judge these facts as good or bad. Who convinced me that my looks make me less than enough? And why had I allowed this faulty thinking to continue for most of my life?

At that moment, I decided to stop judging my looks as good or bad and instead begin to accept myself as I am. I would view my physical appearance neutrally and without judgment. Beauty would become a moot point for me because it had been determined by God. He did not request my input on how to design me, so I need to trust that what I look like is as it should be. There is nothing to improve upon. However I look, it is enough.

After my 30-day boycott on make-up, I began sharing my experience with a few close friends. The thought of leaving off lipstick had never occurred to them. Every one of them said they wear make-up because it's fun, it





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makes them feel feminine, and they feel prettier with make-up than without. I understand all of these responses fully and agree wholeheartedly. At the same time, I have experienced such freedom in not wearing make-up, mainly because I feel released from the struggle to be pretty.

In this download, we'll examine several ways that women struggle—and find peace—with their physical beauty. My hope is that you'll grow more comfortable with the skin you're in and begin to look to God for affirmation of your beauty and worth.

Peace,

Marian V. Liautaud

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use “Loving the Skin You're In” for a group study



“Loving the Skin You're In” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.





Is Beauty the Beast?

After I stopped hating good looks, I was able to put beauty in its rightful place.

By Karen Lee-Thorp

In an address to the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, a nationally known speaker joked that his wife rarely passed a mirror without checking her appearance. He didn't mind, he said, because "she's my glory!" (alluding to 1 Cor. 11:7—"the woman is the glory of man").

I wondered what the men and women in the audience were thinking. Did they say to themselves, "Good for him that he's proud of his wife!"? Did the men contemplate their own wives' appearance and wonder whether it advertised their glory? Did the women compare themselves to this beautiful woman and feel insecure, ashamed, or envious?





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Christians have long been of two minds about physical appearance. A hundred years ago ministers preached against the health dangers of corseting, while pious mothers went right on lacing their daughters into stays that crushed their ribs. Many today will say that *inner* beauty is what counts; how you *look* does not matter. However, the immaculately dressed ECPA speaker evidently comes from the school that thinks otherwise. And if you have tried to go to church in Dallas, get a job in New York, or find a mate in a Christian singles' group anywhere, you know he's right: for better or worse, people do judge books by covers.

Ten years ago I felt superior to those who put so much stock in appearance. I wore no makeup, had my hair cut every few months, and considered my wardrobe irrelevant to the spiritual and intellectual life I was pursuing. When other women obsessed over diets broken, I remained primly silent.

Since then I have awakened to the hypocrisy of my stance. I discovered in the Bible a much richer view of beauty than I had ever heard discussed, either in the world or the church. But to understand the biblical notion of beauty, it is important, first, to examine how the world defines it.

How beauty works

Beauty means love. Children learn that attractiveness is the key to love. What happens to a woman who grows up lacking that precious sense that she is beautiful in the eyes of at least one loving beholder? Nancy Friday, bestselling author of *My Mother/My Self*, is one such





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woman. She wrote her 589-page tome, *The Power of Beauty*, to explain what she freely admits has been a lifelong addiction to being found beautiful. She begins, "I am a woman who needs to be seen. I need it in a basic way, as in to breathe, to eat." Her explanation? Her father abandoned her family shortly after her birth. "There is nothing like the mystery of an absent father to addict you to the loving gaze of men." Nancy grew up knowing her mother considered her older daughter pretty, but Nancy was unattractive until she blossomed in her late teens. By then she was a confirmed exhibitionist, devoted to drawing the loving gaze of anyone from her nurse to her grandfather, and eventually a dizzying string of lovers.

Beauty offers status. Beau Brummell's dictum, "Clothes make the man," still applies to both genders. Susan Holland, president of a Chicago executive recruiting firm, tells job hunters, "There is much more competition out there now. Companies want a lot of reasons to hire you—and keep you—and how you look is one of them." Joely Beatty, senior partner in a California management-consulting firm, warns that subordinates will not respect a newly promoted boss who fails to project the image of his or her rank. Pastors and their spouses walk a minefield regarding respect and image: if they look too sharp, they may be judged as vain or materialistic, while if they look too dowdy, they may be dismissed as out of date or lacking in stature. Since standards vary widely from New England to Atlanta to Los Angeles to Iowa, one has to learn the rules of the game in any new town.





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In our culture, slim is in and fat is contemptible. Fat people receive the kind of open scorn that our society cloaks for other minorities. Christians often assume that being overweight is a moral failing. For instance, a conference organizer, whom I'll call Sharon, was thrilled that one of her spiritual heroines was speaking at her conference. Sharon confided to this famous woman that she, too, was about to begin a speaking career. Sharon's heroine replied, "You know, of course, that the audience isn't going to respect what you have to say."

"What do you mean?" asked Sharon.

"They'll take one look at you and realize that you lack self-discipline. Why should they listen to what you have to say?"

This woman, who has an international reputation for spiritual maturity, assumed that Sharon's size reflected overindulgence. She also knew that Christians would judge such overindulgence much more harshly than, for example, a lack of self-discipline regarding television or sports. Granted, obesity is sometimes (though not always) linked to the sin of gluttony; still, "TV gluttony" does not carry the status stigma that being fat does.

High-calorie foods are plentiful (and few people do the kind of labor that consumes those calories) while vegetables and lean entrees are expensive. People need both leisure and money to cultivate the slim-and-toned look that denotes status. The body that enabled Demi Moore to do the film *Striptease* reportedly required her to spend four hours a day working out, with the help of a personal trainer and \$15,000 worth of gym equipment. All that after several cosmetic surgeries.





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In *His Needs, Her Needs*, a Christian book that has sold more than 500,000 copies, Willard Harley claims that one of a man's basic "needs" is an attractive wife. Men "need" this for many reasons, but among the most important is that "A man also wants an attractive wife as a pure and simple matter of pride. ... Juvenile as it may sound, people often do judge the ability and success of a man in terms of his wife's appearance."

The evidence that people *do* this is overwhelming, but even the evolutionary psychologists underscore that they are reporting merely what is, not what *ought to be*. "I don't know any scientist who thinks you can look to nature for moral guidelines," says biologist Thornhill. For moral guidelines, we have the Bible.

Beauty's two sins

People often think of pride and humility as simple opposites; if you have less pride, you have more humility. Hence, humility and shame (humiliation) get muddled together. However, I think pride and shame are really two sides of the same coin, or two ends of a see-saw. Most of us spend much of our time see-sawing between pride and shame. Today I'm lording it over the other women; tomorrow I hate my body. Either way, I'm gripped by an obsession with self-esteem. Genuine humility, by contrast, comes when I step off that see-saw altogether.

Because of the confusion, some Christians think we should eschew beauty and adornment as temptations to pride and division. I am sure many of the people I know who are doing that are motivated by humility.





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I, however, have found that rejecting beauty can be as serious a sin as worshiping it. I was stunned a few years ago to realize that my self-control around food was anorexia, a fruit not of the Spirit but of a compulsion to control something in my chaotic world. My alleged humility turned out to be merely spiritualized shame and cloaked pride. Beneath my drab clothes and cerebral expression lived a woman who hated her body and who hated and feared beauty as the cause of evil. Like many children who are victims of incest, I had believed that my feminine attractiveness had invited the abuse.

Paradoxically, I also believed myself invisible and ugly because my parents were too busy to notice me (children don't reason these things out). I carried into adulthood a deep conviction that attractiveness was both dangerous and out of my reach. Looking like a boy felt safe and achievable. I papered over this conviction with a hypocritical justification that seemed biblical. Hadn't Peter said that my beauty should have nothing to do with external appearance?

Not quite. Some dualists claim that while our souls may be created in the image of God, our bodies are irrelevant distractions. Incarnational theology will have none of that. Human persons, not merely spirits, reflect God's image. It is conceivable that before disease, aging, and death ravaged human genes, the first man and woman possessed the kind of unspoiled bodies we seem instinctively drawn to. We know we were intended to be healthy, glowing with life, unmarred by stress, so we chafe against the physical signs of our fallenness.





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The Song of Songs affirms that longing to be beautiful. With a lover's eye for every feature, the poet describes the bride's hair, teeth, temples, eyes, cheeks, neck, lips, and breasts. "Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely . . ." The bridegroom's ruddy strength receives similar praise. We may allegorize the Song, but why would God describe his bride in such blatantly physical and erotic terms if he did not rejoice in the physical beauty of his handiwork? God intended us to be as beautiful as this bride, and at the consummation of all things he will restore to us a beauty beyond what even poetry can hint at.

The Song wakened in me a longing I had tried to kill: the longing to be seen and enjoyed as beautiful without being used. I believe this is a God-given longing that all humans are born with, akin to the longing for love. People also woke that longing in me, for while I longed to be beautiful to God, I also wanted that kind of love incarnated in people. I didn't learn to believe in my beauty and feel safe with it just by closeting myself with a Bible; I got there as a handful of people listened to me, grieved with me, shared life with me, and celebrated each time I dared to be beautiful as a woman.

When a coworker whispered, "You look gorgeous!" before we entered a meeting full of strangers, it meant, "I'm on your side. I love you." Her words fed humility and gratitude in me, not pride. She had obeyed the command to "honor one another above yourselves" (Rom. 12:10, NIV), and in doing so, she edified both of us. I learned to take similar compliments from men who had





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proven themselves faithful friends. I can usually sense when a man's comment reflects a desire to have power over my beauty and when it reflects shared power and shared respect.

I believe we err when we distinguish too sharply between inner and outer beauty. The outer is part of what makes the inner available to others, and the way we respond to someone's outer person affects that person inside. Parents carry photos of their children because they love the faces as well as the souls. Being loved, and learning to love in return, changed my face and body as it changed my heart. I gained the weight I needed; I learned that clothes, hair, and makeup could be an asset without becoming an addiction; I smiled more. I still have only two colors of lipstick, and I will never, ever learn to use a brush and a blow dryer at the same time— but it doesn't matter. The lipstick and the hairdo are only tools for saying to the world, "Look at me; I'm alive!"

It is only when we hold physical beauty in high esteem as the handiwork of God that we can fully grieve when people debase it with pride; only when we understand how much our brothers and sisters need to believe in their beauty can we grasp what a crime it is to make them feel ashamed of their inability to pay for the right clothes, or ashamed that God gave them a body shape, bone structure, or skin color that isn't quite good enough; only when we confess that we were never meant to suffer aging and death can we honor youth's glory cleanly and let it go.





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Beauty matters. God didn't tell Leah to stop whining about losing the man's heart to pretty Rachel. In compassion, "When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (Genesis 29:31). The world is full of people who are undervalued because of the way they look, and when we treat them as though that pain matters, we affirm their value.

I don't have a husband who can get up in front of a roomful of people and say, "She's my glory!" But I am grateful to have a God who says that regularly, often through the words of a friend. I never get tired of hearing it.

Karen Lee-Thorp is a senior editor at NavPress and the author of several books, including Why Beauty Matters (NavPress). This article first appeared in CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine.

Reflect

- *Karen Lee-Thorp calls pride and shame the two sins of beauty. In what ways do you think this is true? When you consider your own views of beauty, can you identify any other sins that surface because of a faulty sense of beauty?*
- *In what ways does beauty matter? Why is it important to honor both our physical and inner beauty?*



Beyond Beauty



There's more to life than looking fit and thin. Just ask former supermodel Kim Alexis.

By Ginger E. McFarland

I admit it. Like most women, I struggle with weight, body image, and self-esteem. So the prospect of interviewing former supermodel Kim Alexis was a bit daunting. After all, before there was Cindy Crawford, there was Kim, who dominated the modeling industry in the '80s. She's considered one of the most beautiful women in the world—and she's certainly been one of the most photographed. Kim's graced more than 500 magazine covers, including *Vogue* and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit editions, and was a spokesperson for Revlon for three years. She's appeared on several TV shows and movies, worked as fashion editor on ABC's *Good Morning America*, as fitness/nutrition correspondent on *The 700 Club*, hosted several TV shows, and served as a spokeswoman for health and wellness products.



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No wonder I held in my breath—as well as my gut—when we met at a Ritz Carlton close to her home. Yet I was pleasantly surprised—and relieved—to discover Kim looks like your average working woman and mom. And she'd be the first to tell you that despite the glamour and fame of her international modeling career, that world took a toll on her self-esteem and her relationships.

As Kim and I sit down to chat, she reveals what she's learned about beauty, self-esteem, and *spiritual* fitness in this exclusive interview.

How did your modeling career affect your self-esteem?

The constant pressure to look and dress a certain way, to present a certain image, made me feel very insecure and vulnerable. And at first, I didn't realize how unrealistic that image was. When I was only 17, John Casablancas, the head of Elite modeling agency in New York City, pursued me to become a model. After I finally agreed, he said something that totally shattered me: "By the way, Kim, you need to lose 15 pounds." I was devastated! I'd never given any thought to my figure before, and I certainly wasn't overweight; I was an athlete who was already lifting weights and swimming five and a half hours a day for my high-school swim team. That one comment punched a hole in my self-esteem.

What did you do?

The only way I could drop 15 pounds was by starving myself. I began trying every fad diet around—and if I didn't drop 10 pounds in a week, I was on to the next one. My metabolism got messed up. As a result, like





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other models who had to diet to maintain their "image," I lost my period for two years.

At what point did you finally wake up and say, This is hurting my body, my health?

It's been a slow process. While I was modeling, I was miserable. I had no energy. It even affected my personality. Even today, I hear that little voice inside me that tells me I need to lose 15 pounds—even though I'm perfectly fine the way I am.

Further into my career, I wanted to stay young-looking and thin. A lot of the models would read something about eating healthy. I would try it and found that I felt better. I think that's part of the responsibility of growing up.

Now I think about what I eat because I want to eat healthy, since it affects my ability to be a good wife and mother, to be the kind of person God wants me to be.

Unfortunately, I'm still paying for the strange things I put my body through.

How so?

I was driven, obsessed with being thin and strong and looking good, so I ran seven marathons. One of the reasons I was so eager to run marathons was that no other model would do it. I wanted to prove I was a real athlete. But I ran marathons right after having babies—six months after I had Jamie, and five months after I had Bobby. I put a lot of stress on my system: I dropped 50 pounds within two and a half months after





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Bobby came. It was too much for me. My body really, really, *really* wanted to stop when I was running that marathon after Bobby was born, but I wouldn't let myself.

Plus, I have hypothyroidism, which wasn't helped by my schedule or by my having babies during that hectic time. My doctor told me that my excessive, strenuous exercise damaged my endocrine system—the system of glands (thyroid, adrenal, and pituitary) that produces hormones that help my body adapt to stress and signals such things as body temperature and metabolism. So I had to slow down, for my health's sake.

How does this condition affect you?

My metabolism is slower, so I don't digest and use calories as well as "normal people." It makes me fatigued and forgetful and irritable if I don't have my daily amount of hormone supplements. I need to take naps and I gain weight more easily.

That's quite a price to pay.

Yeah. But it's helped me learn to look to God to realize what's really important and long-lasting—and how fleeting and unimportant other things are. I've got two legs. I've got two eyes. I've got wonderful kids. I have so many things to be thankful for. Those are the things I need to concentrate on instead of wishing I still looked a certain way or weighed a certain amount.

The truth is everyone, even a supermodel like Cindy Crawford or Claudia Schiffer, could point out some bodily feature with which she's not happy. And, actually, that's good for all of us—it keeps us humble.





Loving the Skin You're In Beyond Beauty

What's your definition of true beauty?

It's what God's definition is: the attitude of the heart. That's how I think he judges us. True beauty is that sparkle in the eye, the sparkle of the knowledge of Christ. Obviously what the world sees is the outer surface—skin that's going to become dust some day.

How do you feel about going into that next decade? You've spent so much time in the modeling industry where they prize youth.

I don't worry about it any more. Thirty-eight was my turning point. For some reason, I felt my mortality more. I can't control my body in terms of trying to look like I did in my 20s. I make my living on my looks; it's a big part of who I am. As I age and lose some of those looks, I've discovered I have to rely more on the inside Kim and the eternal Kim.

I want to attract people to the wonderful friend I've found in Jesus. He's taught me about accepting who I am. I mean, I'm not a young supermodel anymore. I can see those little lines when I smile—and they're not much fun to look at sometimes. But I want to be remembered for more than my looks. I'm defined by what I do, say, believe, exemplify. I want people to see what's on the inside—Jesus.

This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.





Reflect

- *Who do you consider the most beautiful supermodel? What features make her beautiful?*
- *Scripture tells us, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) What inward feature do you feel is most attractive on you?*
- *Have you ever attempted extreme measures to lose weight or get in shape, like Kim Alexis did? What was the outcome?*
- *How do you define true beauty?*





If Thy Stomach Offends Thee

Weight loss for me isn't
about beauty or health.

By Lisa Ann Cockrel

There she was, walking toward me up the church aisle. Mary gave me my first job as a teenager—modeling clothes at fashion shows for her plus-size boutique—and I'd heard she had gastric bypass surgery since I'd last seen her. Indeed, half of the Mary I'd known approached.

"Lisa, you've got to talk to your doctor," she said. "Really, you should consider having a gastric bypass. I feel fabulous." Mary was nothing if not to the point.

"I'd rather die!" I told my sister.





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Five years later, I almost did die after having weight-loss surgery. I woke up in the recovery room to strains of America's "Sister Golden Hair," an auspicious start if ever there was one. But within hours, I was pale and fainting. Eventually, I was diagnosed with a blood clot in my lungs. And over the following months, I contracted pneumonia, hemorrhaged, and needed three blood transfusions.

One-and-a-half years later and 100 pounds lighter, I still feel ambivalent about going under the knife in a bid to lose weight. The hard questions that led up to surgery still linger.

I've long been aware of the extent to which food has defined my person—for good and for bad. Considering surgery meant considering the death, or at least the maiming, of the vision of myself to which I'd grown accustomed.

But fear of losing my identity quickly gave way to questions about the theological ramifications of surgery: What would it mean to have a doctor section off a portion of my stomach and then reroute my digestive system?

Gnostic heresies be damned; bodies matter. God took one on. The resurrection of one is the locus of my salvation. Would seeking to control my own in this heavy-handed manner signal a loathing of my physical self?

On the other hand, in Matthew 5, doesn't Jesus advocate doing away with physical appendages that cause us to sin? Most scholars quickly add that Jesus isn't





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advocating amputation; the problem is with the heart. But this vivid picture resonated with me as I considered a gastric bypass. After all, a host of ascetics throughout church history advocated serious deprivation, even torture, of the body in a bid for increased holiness.

I was at a stalemate.

That's when I heard about a procedure called gastric banding, in which a doctor places an adjustable band around the stomach. Food passes through the constriction slowly, so you feel full quicker and for a longer period. The weight loss is slower, but there is no damage done to the natural working of internal organs—no rejection of the self.

After asking myself one key question—"What woman doesn't have a pair of control-top pantyhose tucked away in her underwear drawer?"—I let a doctor slip on this internal girdle.

Despite losing 100 pounds, I still have a lot of weight to lose. And I've recently encountered another snag: Part of the implanted device has flipped. This will mean another surgery.

In the meantime, ads remind me every day that no money or energy should be spared in order to avoid having a body like mine. Yet, I've never hated my arms and legs and everything that's connected to them. I am sometimes embarrassed by my girth; my frailty is writ large in the stretch marks etched across my body's surface. But my body is me. And I am loved by my Creator. Therefore, my





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body has the same intrinsic value shared by all bodies—skinny, short, missing an arm, featuring webbed toes and a big nose, or otherwise.

It's that belief that made the idea of having weight-loss surgery so difficult to swallow. But it's also that belief that motivates me to strive to live the best possible way in this body today. My ongoing bid to lose weight really isn't about beauty or health, goals those ads often advocate. I'm happy to believe I possess at least some unique measure of beauty, and I've never been more ill than when in pursuit of skinniness.

Instead, I want a body that will allow me to better engage the world God put me in—to be able to take long walks through Manhattan with my best friend, to spend a day gardening with my mom, to play a game of pickup basketball with my brothers.

For all the sensory pleasure God provides through food, there is more of his creation to be experienced. I'm trying to trade some of the known (Christmas cookies) for some of the unknown (a bike ride along Chicago's Lake Shore Drive). I want to move from that which takes me into myself to that which promotes a loving relationship with God's world and the people in it.

I think that's pretty much what the Christian life is about— whether you're fat, skinny, or somewhere in between.

This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.





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Reflect

- *Have you ever contemplated surgery to lose weight? If so, why did you choose for or against this measure? What would you tell someone who is contemplating using surgical means for weight loss?*
- *Author Lisa Cockrel says that she wants a body that will allow her to engage the world God put her in. What benefits would compel you to want to lose weight?*
- *Lisa ends her article by saying she is trying to trade some of the known sensory pleasure of food with some of the unknown, such as a bike ride along Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. Make your own list of "unknowns." How would these activities "promote a loving relationship with God's world and the people in it"?*





Redefining “Beautiful”

How five women view physical beauty.

By Terri Urban; Kimberly Jordan; Jeanette Campbell; Lynn Shaw; Calista Baker

Through my missions work with hungry, uneducated children in developing countries, I've learned that worrying about a skin blemish or my oversized nose is a superficial waste of energy. I need my passion for more important things!

—Terri Urban, Colorado

My daughter, Hannah, was 5 months old and I was still pudgy, jiggly, and lumpy from what I call “the 4th trimester,” when I discovered I was pregnant again. As I hung up the maternity clothes I'd put in storage only days earlier, my size-6 jeans taunted me in my closet.





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Redefining "Beautiful"

Hannah is now 18 months, and sweet baby Sarah is 4-1/2 months old. Yesterday, Hannah touched my cheek and said, "Mama pretty!" Her sincerity made me feel like a queen. Last night, Sarah's entire face lit up with a radiant smile as I walked into the room. This morning, my husband looked at me with love in his eyes, silently telling me I'm a beautiful wife and mother. I'm blessed with a family that reflects the God-given beauty within me.

And those before-baby jeans? I gave them away. Last time I checked, God's beauty didn't come packaged in size 6!

—Kimberly Jordan, Arizona

A few months ago, I joined a weight-loss program and started going to the gym every day so I could look beautiful. Soon after, I realized I was trying to live up to the world's impossible standard of beauty, not God's. Proverbs 31:30 says, "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Now when I exercise, my focus isn't fitting into a certain clothing size, it's staying healthy so I can live long enough to watch my children grow up and have children of their own.

—Jeanette Campbell, Ohio





Loving the Skin You're In Redefining "Beautiful"

Every year our town selects a woman to reign over its 4th of July festivities. Last year my professional women's group asked me to represent them in this competition. Though I thought it would be a great way to highlight our group, I almost didn't participate, because I have what author Liz Curtis Higgs calls an "abundantly blessed body."

When my name was announced as the winner, I was stunned. I'd prayed I'd represent women of all sizes who struggle with the idea that beauty is only external, but I had no idea I'd actually win! Receiving so many well wishes since that night has helped me be able to look at the pictures of my crowning and see the glow of my spirit instead of the size of my body.

When I rode in the 4th of July parade with my husband and our boys, I didn't dwell on whether or not I looked good. I simply had fun waving and celebrating the first Independence Day of the new millennium. We had a blast!

—Lynn Shaw, Indiana

My mom taught me a lot about beauty as she cared for her own ailing mother a few years ago. Real beauty was the way Mom unselfishly spent day after day at the nursing home. Real beauty was my mom stroking her mom's hair and singing "Family of God" in her ear. Real beauty was evident in this woman who never complained about putting her life on hold





Loving the Skin You're In Redefining "Beautiful"

for several months. As I watched Mom nurturing her mom during the days before Grandma's death, I knew this was true beauty in action.

—*Calista Baker, Kansas*

These words of encouragement first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

Reflect

- *Try to recall times when you felt beautiful. What were the circumstances? Write your own definition of beauty.*
- *Who needs to know they are beautiful? What can you tell this individual to affirm their beauty?*
- *Do a topical search in the Bible on the word beauty. Write down verses that help you focus on God's view of beauty. Which verses can you commit to memory?*





All I Want for Christmas Is a Bigger Bust

How the incarnation helps Christians think about plastic surgery.

By Collin Hansen

Still don't know what to get that special someone for Christmas? The hot gift this year just might be breast implants. *Newsweek* reported that "more older women are getting breast surgery than ever before." What age and childbearing stole, plastic surgeons promise to restore.

With a record number of operations, you never know who's gone under the knife. Indeed, plastic surgery is a hot topic, especially among Christian women. Is it ever appropriate? If so, when and what types? One woman who participated in a



Loving the Skin You're In

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roundtable for *Today's Christian Woman* magazine said she would not allow her daughter to undergo an operation until she turns 21. After then it's fair game. "Talking about internal beauty is fine for a grandmother or a mentor," she said. "But what about for a teenage girl trying to attract a mate? How she looks determines what kind of husband she'll get."

It's hard to completely reject this mother's pragmatic concern, seeing how images on the television and Internet train men to objectify women. But what about her theology? How does God's Word teach us to think about beauty and our bodies? The Bible tells us God made man and woman in his image (Genesis 1:26–27). There are no qualifications—not "only the beautiful," "but not after 45," or "unless you've birthed three kids." We have ultimate worth and dignity thanks to the act of this Creator God. As for beauty, the Bible cuts to the heart: "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Proverbs 31:30).

But not all beauty is bad in the Bible. God uses Esther's renowned beauty to put her in a position next to the king so she could save the Jewish people. Still, physical attributes can mask problems. Saul stands a head taller than any other Israelite. Physical prowess could be one reason he succumbed to self-sufficiency. Proving his point, God raised up a small shepherd boy to defeat the gargantuan Philistine. But David later resorted to murder when he lusted after a beautiful, bathing Bathsheba.





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We can only guess what the central figure of Scripture looked like. One messianic passage does drop a hint. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). At the same time, we know much about what Jesus said and did. And we know why God sent his one and only Son. When Jesus took on flesh and dwelled among us, God taught us that flesh has everlasting value. At the end of days, believers will worship God forever in resurrection bodies. To reject the Incarnation would lead us to perpetuate Gnostic heresy.

Yet our unique age poses new problems. We pack on the pounds thanks to sedentary lifestyles, seated in front of televisions and computers and eating processed foods. Jesus didn't get to choose between walking and driving from Galilee to Judea. Nor could he stop by a Jerusalem doctor for a quick nose job. But if he could, would he?

Obviously some types of plastic surgery illustrate the healing power of medicine. Here we can think about disfiguring accidents and diseases. But elective plastic surgery has a therapeutic purpose, to make us feel better about ourselves or to attract attention from others. It values appearance but not flesh. Contrast this with Jesus' example. The crying baby in Bethlehem grew up and sweat tears of blood in Jerusalem. He gave his body as a sacrifice to save his people from their sins. Likewise, God calls us to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).





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With every passing year, the mirror tells us we can't win the war against aging. Yet in the weakness of our flesh, God directs us toward his all-sufficiency (2 Cor. 12:9). What the first Adam could not do, the second Adam finished. Apart from this act of the flesh there is no hope.

Collin Hansen is a CT editor-at-large and author of Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists (Crossway, 2008). This article first appeared in CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine.

Reflect

- *How do you feel about plastic surgery? Under what circumstances do you think it's okay to surgically enhance your looks?*
- **Isaiah 53:2** *describes Jesus like this: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." How does this help you think about the emphasis we should be placing on physical beauty?*





Pampering with a Purpose

How hairstylists are bringing their talents—and the Truth—to people in need.

By Keri Wyatt Kent

Once a month, a group of dedicated professionals ventures into their community to serve those less fortunate than themselves. They're not carrying hammers and nails to build a house, or ladles and pots to work in a soup kitchen. Rather, they're armed with blow dryers, scissors, and nail polish. Oh yes, and love.

The volunteers of HIM—Hairdressers in the Marketplace, a ministry at Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago—host monthly "day of beauty" sessions where women in need receive free pampering, from haircuts to manicures, but also hear about God's love for them. HIM also goes to nursing homes for the poor, homeless shelters, and facilities for the mentally handicapped to provide free haircuts.





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Hairstylist Teresa Russo-Cox founded the ministry in 1998 after trying numerous volunteer positions at Willow Creek, where she attended. None felt like the right fit for her skills and passions. For a while, she wrestled with God. "Why did you give me a talent that's so much about vanity?" she prayed. "How can I serve you?"

She says God answered those prayers with a vision for a group that not only communicates God's love and care to women in need but also reaches out to stylists themselves. "That's what sets us apart from other ministries that offer haircuts to the poor," explains Teresa. "We focus on evangelism to the beauty industry, which is filled with so much darkness. Its underlying message is all about external things—glamour and glitz. I want to bring the light of God's Word into our industry."

Day of Beauty events are hosted by various local salons on Sundays when they'd normally be closed. Social service organizations that help women, such as support groups for those struggling with addictions, unwanted pregnancy, or domestic abuse, provide the clients. In addition to the beauty services, HIM also sets up a boutique of used clothing and accessories, donated by volunteers and their friends, family, or neighbors, and provides a "goodie bag" to each participant.

"We start the day with a welcome and prayer, and close with prayer as well," says HIM volunteer Susan Fignar. Teresa or another leader gently shares with participants the reason for this ministry: They want to show God's love. But rather than a formal presentation, the gospel's





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presented through the informal exchanges between stylists and clients. The session concludes with an opportunity for clients to talk about what the day meant to them.

"I told Teresa I wasn't sure I wanted to do hair on my day off," says Melissa Carroll-Chmura, who joined the ministry five years ago and now coordinates the events with another volunteer, Susan Johnsey. "But it's not just about the haircuts, or helping the poor. It's the total experience of the day, sharing God's unconditional love, bringing them joy. *That's* worth taking a day off for."

At a recent event, the clients were teen girls going through drug and alcohol rehab. Melissa says she was surprised by the girls' reactions: "They told me they hadn't had 'sober fun' before—they'd never experienced that."

The agencies that provide the clients aren't necessarily Christian agencies, and have sometimes balked at having the volunteers talk about God. "I just tell them, I can't not talk about God," Teresa says. "It's why we do this. I tell them, 'you will hear me talk about Jesus, you will hear me pray.' But I don't do it in a pushy way. I simply tell them what Jesus has done in my life, and that he loves them."

"It gives the women more than a haircut, although a haircut means a lot," says Beth Gardham, director of community resources for WINGS (Women in Need Growing Stronger), an agency that helps suburban homeless women and children as well as victims





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of domestic abuse. "A lot of our women have to cut their own hair or have a friend cut it. A haircut and style allows them to feel like they used to be, or how they would like to be," she says. (Learn more at www.wingsprogram.com.)

"I had no self-esteem," says Doreen, who was invited to a Day of Beauty after she and her two preschool children left her alcoholic, abusive husband. "That day gave me a boost on the outside but it helped me on the inside, too. They made me feel beautiful, special, and deserving."

Beth says her agency uses the event as a perk for "women who are working the program" at WINGS—that means taking steps with the agency's help to become self-supporting.

She says the women are excited about the day, but some have a bit of trepidation. "Some folks don't want to talk about their situation," she explains. "So we get mixed reactions to the sharing part at the end. But often, we'll hear women ask, 'When are they coming back?'"

Everyone benefits, she adds. "It's good for the women in our program. It's also good for the professionals who volunteer. They're giving back to their community, but also, they're reminded that the women in our program are just like anyone else."

Today, more than 50 stylists (both women and men) in the Chicago area are active in HIM. In addition to Day of Beauty events, HIM volunteers meet for Bible-study small groups and host professional education seminars.





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With the emphasis on inviting friends to these seminars, stylists may be Muslim, Jewish, or of no particular religious background. They come to learn the latest hair-color technique or just to volunteer, but come away having heard about Jesus' love. Two such stylists, for instance, started out far from God but because of their involvement with HIM recently became Christians and were baptized.

"I've seen great things happen in our small groups," Teresa says. "I have a little flock of five Christians who've been together quite a while. They came in as scared little sheep, but they've really grown into women of faith.

Some of that growth came when ten stylists took a trip to Costa Rica back in 2003, where the church had sent other short-term mission teams. They put on an event at the Rahab Foundation, a mission in San Jose that helps rescue and provide life-training skills for women caught in prostitution, rampant in Costa Rica.

When the women who came to the mission learned Teresa's story and that they would receive free beauty services that day, "Some started crying, others didn't know how to respond, and there were a few who sat with their arms folded, secluding themselves from what was going to take place. But as the day progressed and love filled the room, the women were touched and experienced love in a very unique way," Teresa says.

"We became the eyes, ears, mouth, and hands of Jesus," she adds. "The women from the center kept hugging us; we weren't sure who got served more."





Loving the Skin You're In Pampering with a Purpose

Teresa, Melissa and other volunteers say that every time they serve, they receive. "The biggest reward is not what the clients leave with, although it's a blessing to bring a light into their day," Melissa says. "It's that the volunteers leave with a feeling of satisfaction that comes from giving."

HOW TO DO IT AT YOUR CHURCH 6 tips for a successful hairstylist ministry.

1. Begin by praying for every aspect of the ministry.
2. Before offering services, assemble a team of hairdressers. Communicate your purpose and vision through both teaching and small groups. Get someone with administrative gifts to help coordinate. Volunteer stylists don't have to be Christians; in fact, it can be an outreach to them.
3. Work together with an outside agency that screens clients and handles logistics. Otherwise, you may get people who are simply trying to take advantage of free haircuts.
4. Provide the services in a salon, where most of the equipment is already in place, rather than at your church. Or go to a nursing home that has an in-house salon.
5. Be extremely sensitive. While some women enjoy the gentle massage that goes with a manicure, pedicure, or shampoo, those who've experienced abuse may associate any touch with pain. "If you're a victim of abuse, being touched, even gently, can be very scary," points out Beth Gardham, director of community resources for an agency that helps homeless and abused women.
6. Learn as much as you can about those you serve. Get to know them as people. Through love and respect, provide dignity.

—K. W. K.

Keri Wyatt Kent is a speaker, author, and freelance writer from Illinois. This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.



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Additional Resources

Books, Bible studies, and articles to help you further.



Uncommon Beauty: 7 Qualities of a Beautiful Woman

by Cynthia Heald (Tyndale House, 2007, 144 pages).

Svelte supermodels in trendy magazines have set the standard of style in today's image-conscious culture.

Heald takes you beyond retouched photos to reveal that *true* beauty is more than skin-deep. Sharing insights from women in Scripture, society, and literature, she helps you cultivate wisdom, integrity, courage, and more as you grow beautiful from the inside out!





Loving the Skin You're In

Additional Resources

Becoming a Woman of Beauty & Strength: A Woman After God's Own Heart Series, Esther by Elizabeth George (Harvest House Publishers, 2001, 160 pages). You can be like Esther, and become a woman of beauty and strength by cultivating an abiding trust in God, waiting patiently and seeking wise counsel, and preparing for and persisting in the assignments God gives. As you follow the leading of God's hand, you'll see God guiding and working through you ... giving you a special beauty and strength that touches everyone around you.

Authentic Beauty: The Shaping of a Set-Apart Young Woman by Leslie Ludy (Multnomah, 2007, 256 pages). Refreshingly candid and hopeful, Ludy challenges young women ages 18 to 32 to rise above culture's mediocre expectations and reclaim the feminine mystique as God designed it. A personal application section follows each chapter. Companion study guide sold separately. Includes frank language about sexuality.

Do You Think I'm Beautiful?: The Question Every Woman Asks by Angela Thomas (Thomas Nelson, 2005, 224 pages). Little girls know about Cinderella—about her breathtaking beauty, about Prince Charming, about a magical destiny called "happily ever after." And inside every woman is a little girl who secretly aches for a fairy godmother to wave a wand and transform her into the princess she has always longed to be. To make her beautiful. Captivating. Adored.





Loving the Skin You're In

Additional Resources

But we've learned that fairy tales aren't real, so we squelch our precious gifts of longing and desire. We stop dressing up or anticipating the ball, deciding it's better to stay home than to hope again and be disappointed. Besides, being asked to dance isn't all that important anyway.

Oh, but it is! In *Do You Think I'm Beautiful*, Thomas invites you to awaken your passion and glimpse your deepest desires. To voice your longing to be loved with an ultimate love. And to fall into the embrace of the One who asks you to dance.

Beautiful: How to Be a Beautiful Woman of God by Beth Redman (Gospel Light, 2006, 128 pages). From Dove Award-winner Beth Redman, co-author of the hit worship song "Blessed Be Your Name," comes a refreshing look at true beauty. Challenging twenty- and thirty-something women to live "big lives" while enjoying a faithful relationship with God, she offers heartfelt advice on overcoming obstacles such as insecurity, comparison, unforgiveness, gossip, jealousy, and more.

Focus on the Family Women's Series #6: Created Beautiful (Gospel Light, 2005, 96 pages). This book addresses topics such as: who defines beauty, replacing negative thoughts with God's truth, beautiful aging, and caring for your body. Each session includes an interview with an "everyday woman," eternal wisdom, enduring hope, and application to everyday life.



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