

WHAT MAKES A WOMAN TRULY BEAUTIFUL?

By Jim Mersereau

On April 12, 2012 my mother passed away. On April 27th I turned fifty-eight years old. And on April 29th we buried her in San Diego with my Dad. So in my fifty-eight years of life, Mother's Day 2012 was the first without my Mother actually being here for me to honor. So as a final Mother's Day gift, I wrote this article to honor her.

One thing that stands out in my mind about the days and weeks after her death is the amazing number of tributes about her that came pouring in from all over the country. Tribute after tribute in the form of phone calls, cards, letters, emails, even posts on Facebook. They came from her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, friends, church members, neighbors from forty years ago, etc. One guy, who knew my mother when he was a child, actually got on a plane in Dallas, TX early in the morning, flew to Nashville, rented a car, drove to Crossville, TN to attend the funeral we held for her there, then immediately drove back to Nashville and flew home to Dallas - all in one day, just to attend my mother's funeral service. What a tribute!

A common thread woven throughout those many tributes - one phrase that was used numerous times by different people was that she was such a beautiful person. Over and over again, by people who had a wide variety of different types of relationships with her, it was noted that she was a beautiful person.

Now, without question I agree with that assessment - she was indeed a beautiful person. But that has caused me to think long and deep about why people thought that about her. What was it about my mother that caused people to conclude that she was a beautiful person? What is true beauty anyway? Where does it come from and what makes a woman truly beautiful?

I believe true beauty comes from the inside out. It starts in the heart and works its way out where it can be seen. The Apostle Peter would certainly agree with that. In 1 Peter 3:3-4 he wrote:

"Your beauty should not consist of outward things like elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of fine clothes; instead, it should consist of the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very valuable in God's eyes."

I believe there are three common ways in which a woman can be seen as being beautiful. First of all, she can be born beautiful.

Would you agree that every woman wants to be considered to be beautiful? I think that's probably a universal desire. Whether she is six or sixty, married or single, living in Crossville, TN or Zimbabwe Africa, women want to be thought of as being beautiful. And that's not necessarily a bad desire by the way. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be attractive in appearance, and the fact is that some women are simply born that way. I think that was probably true of the first woman, Eve. I think she was probably a very attractive woman - at least to Adam she was!

The Bible also gives us descriptions of other women who were born with great physical beauty. Abraham's wife Sarah was a great beauty - so much so that Abraham was afraid other men might try to kill him so they could get her.

Queen Esther was also described as an extraordinarily beautiful woman. The young woman who was the subject of Solomon's "Song of Songs" in the Old Testament was so alluring that a pretty steamy love story was written about her and it was actually included in the

Bible. Some women are simply born with physical beauty.

But physical beauty isn't always such a great blessing. For a short while, during the younger years, it will often gain a woman a lot of attention, and while she might find that flattering, it's relatively short-lived and very often can actually be the source of many problems.

Sometimes a beautiful woman will discover she is the object of more attention than she really wants. I'm sure a woman can get pretty tired of being ogled by men; of being the object of lustful thoughts; of feeling like men are undressing her with their eyes.

Also, sometimes that kind of constant attention will result in a woman developing an inflated ego, often becoming self-absorbed and unkind. Too much attention and flattery can have a negative effect on a woman's personality.

Having great physical beauty can also sometimes create relationship problems. Many men who are initially attracted to a woman of great physical beauty and end up married to her, eventually discover that they get very tired of all the attention she attracts from other men. Many times those husbands end up insecure and resentful and consequently the marriage relationship suffers.

And then of course, as the years pass and the physical beauty fades, if the woman was depending on her physical beauty for her sense of self-worth, she could end up depressed and insecure. There are few things sadder to observe than an older woman desperately trying to cling to her youthful beauty by wearing excessive makeup, and revealing clothes, and getting repeated Botox injections that make her face look like wax.

So yes, some women are born with physical beauty - and it is ok, but it's temporary, it's not always a blessing, and sometimes it can actually be a curse.

The second way a woman can be beautiful is she can buy beauty. Yes, in our day beauty is for sale. American women spend literally billions of dollars each year on cosmetics and clothes, hair stylists and weight loss programs, face lifts and tummy tucks.

Granted, buying beauty isn't a new thing. Even in the Biblical text the Apostle Peter wrote about women in his day getting their hair done, wearing fine clothes and expensive jewelry, etc. There isn't necessarily anything wrong with that either. As I said before, we should pay attention to our appearance and we should make an effort to be clean and nicely dressed.

It's also true that as we age our bodies *need* more attention if we are going to maintain a decent and presentable appearance. For one thing, as we age our metabolism slows down and so we need to pay more attention to what we eat and how much exercise we get than we did when we were younger. If we don't, then the older we get the more overweight we will become and that will certainly affect our appearance – not to mention our health.

Likewise, as we age other changes occur to our bodies that require attention. In my own case I've discovered that my hair follicles have migrated from the top of my head to the inside of my ears. Now instead of growing hair on my head that has to be combed, I grow corn stalks out of my ears that have to be cut back.

Fortunately there are things we can buy that help us maintain some degree of physical beauty as we age. Cosmetics, new clothes, jewelry, nose hair trimmers ... all of those things do help.

But there's also a downside to buying beauty. For one thing, it can become vain and egotistical. It can also be very expensive – and in many cases that's money which would be better spent on other more meaningful things. Also, fads and fashions change quickly. So the sixty year old aging hippie with the pony tail and ear ring who thinks he looks so cool today can easily find himself looking ridiculous tomorrow.

The point is that sometimes some amount of beauty can be bought. But still, it's not real beauty.

The third, and best, and real way a woman can be beautiful is she can become beautiful from the inside out. This is what Peter was describing in verses 3-4. It's also what all those people were talking about with respect to my mother. My mom was beautiful, but it was a beauty that came from her heart and worked its way out.

Although she did have a physical appearance that was pleasant, she would be the first to tell you that she was by no measure a great physical beauty. She wasn't a Rita Hayworth or a Marilyn Monroe. She also didn't spend much money on clothes or jewelry or makeup. For most of her life she had little extra money for those things and she lived an extremely modest lifestyle.

And yet, as people look back and remember the eighty-two years of her life the one phrase that keeps being repeated is "She was such a beautiful person." How did that happen? Where did the beauty come from?

When I preached her funeral service in San Diego I told the folks there that regardless of all her other many attributes, the most important thing about my mother was her Christian faith. It was her faith in Jesus Christ, and a life lived in faithful obedience to His commands, that made her the person she was.

As a young child my mother placed her faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of her sins. Then she lived the rest of her life as an extremely devout Catholic. Her faith and her participation in the life of her church were more important to her than anything else. She raised her children in the church; she was faithful in her attendance and support of the church; she spoke about God and faith frequently; and she intentionally modeled Christian virtues in the conduct of her daily life. She was a godly woman who loved the Lord and she lived a life that honored Him.

It was that faith, and her consistent and faithful practice of it, that made her the woman she was. That's where the true beauty in her life came from. It's why, after all those years, all those people think of her as having been a truly beautiful person. She was the kind of woman Peter was writing about in verse 4.

In verse 5 Peter explained that historically this has always been true of godly women, this is where their true beauty always came from:

"For in the past, the holy women who hoped in God also beautified themselves in this way ..."

In Galatians 5:22-23 the Apostle Paul wrote:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control."

What we see in the lives of those women who have true beauty is the fruit of the Holy Spirit flowing out of their hearts and impacting all those who encounter them.

Despite having been born with only ordinary physical beauty, and despite having spent most of her eighty-two years with little extra money with which to buy beauty, my mother had a spiritual beauty that radiated out of her. Over the years, as she cultivated her relationship with the Lord, her true beauty grew. While those born with great physical beauty watched it slowly diminish with the passing of the years, my mother's true beauty, her spiritual beauty, the beauty that came from her heart and radiated out, actually continued to increase. While those who were frantically spending huge sums of money trying to buy their beauty watched fashions change - therefore necessitating the spending of even more money just to keep up, the Holy Spirit continued to bring out in my mom even greater degrees of real beauty that didn't diminish or

change with the times.

The truth is that *real* beauty, *true* beauty, is not acquired at birth and it cannot be purchased. It's something you become, over time, through a deep relationship with Jesus Christ. A woman can become beautiful, from the inside out, and that is where real beauty comes from.

One year as Mother's Day was approaching a fourth grade teacher gave her students an assignment to write an essay which began with the phrase, "My mother is...." And the kids were to take it from there.

The teacher reported that the overwhelming response from the majority of the students was "My mother is ... beautiful." The teacher said that the interesting thing about all those responses was that she knew most of those mothers and most of them were not what we would consider to be physically beautiful. And yet, in the eyes of those children, their mothers were ... "beautiful".

What was it those children saw in their mothers which caused them to be described as being beautiful? According to those essays it was love, care, compassion, warmth, laughter, joy. It was the understanding that my mother is a genuinely good person who loves me deeply, accepts me unconditionally, will defend me and protect me. Those were the attributes that constituted true beauty in the eyes of those children. It wasn't good looks, or expensive clothes, or the latest hairstyle. Over and over again the children described admirable character traits; they talked about the personality of their mothers which made them such special people; they wrote about tenderness, and kindness, and special moments.

The Biblical truth is that there is a beauty available which will never fade or diminish with age - in fact it gets better as the years go by. It is an inner beauty that cannot be purchased, but comes instead as a free gift from God. It is a beauty that will never go out of style, and it is a beauty which will be remembered and cherished by all those who knew and loved you, long after you are gone from this world. It's a beauty that can be your legacy.

I'm so grateful for the mother God gave me. She was a beautiful person and she left a legacy that will be remembered for generations in our family. I hope your family will be able to say the same about you. I encourage you to pursue true beauty - godly beauty - the kind that comes from the inside and then works its way out.