

## “Skin Deep” January 11, 2008

I know someone who is always obsessing about her looks. She frets about her nose being too big, and goes into a panic when an “age spot” appears. Almost all her conversations focus around her appearance, or someone else’s—whether he’s handsome enough, or if she is pretty enough. It seems that she spends a lot of time and energy trying to assess people by the way they look, by their appearance.

On the occasions that I’m with her and she starts in on that line of thinking, I have been known to say, “Beauty is only skin deep, you know.” She sort of nods in agreement, and then goes right on talking about a blemish on her cheek or how she has gained so much weight.

The reality is that she isn’t the only person on earth to be consumed with this kind of thing. Actually it seems to be something that’s reinforced by our society. After all, how many TV shows can we watch without seeing a commercial that has to do with our hair or skin or whatever? In fact, I caught a glimpse of one of those talk shows, or maybe it was an ad for one, that talked about a woman who had had an unbelievable number of plastic surgeries. She didn’t like the way she looked, and she went to great extents to totally alter her appearance. My guess is that she wanted to feel better about herself, and thought that changing her appearance would do it.

We’re often besieged with marketers who peddle their products, hoping we’ll give in to the allure of being more attractive if we’ll just purchase the product or service they’re trying to sell. The reality is that many of us buy into that thinking, and do precisely that.

Now there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s important that we take care of our bodies, and have enough pride in ourselves to have good hygiene, clean clothes, and all that kind of thing. And we know what we have to do when it comes to being healthy—things like exercise, proper diet, adequate rest, and so on. That’s all good common sense, because it’s important to take care of the shell that encases us on this earth.

However, there are other voices out there in our world urging to think a bit differently. I’m sure we’ve all heard many of the adages that tell us about the being careful when it comes to external appearances. There are clichés like, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and “Beauty is as beauty does.” We also hear things like, “Clothes don’t make the man,” and “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” All those sayings caution us about putting too much value on outward appearance, because there’s always more to a person than meets the eye.

Frankly, it seems to me that putting all our stock into our looks may be a bit off track. Now maybe I say that because I’ve never had the kind of looks to put stock into anyway! That’s entirely possible, so maybe this is a defense mechanism getting triggered! Nonetheless, I do

think there’s at least a shred of truth in what I’m talking about.

While it’s important to put our best foot forward when it comes to the way we present ourselves, it seems far more important to me to cultivate that which is within us—our character, our personality, our virtues, our integrity. I believe it’s important to nurture the beauty within as well as our outward beauty.

That’s basically what our Bible passage is saying. The writer of this passage from I Peter is talking about the kind of person that we become inwardly as we grow closer to God. It refers to the kind of person we grow into as God’s love of us really takes hold. It’s the inner beauty that is who we are, much more than our external appearance.

Our passage reads like this: **“Cultivate inner beauty, the gentle, gracious kind that God delights in...Summing up; Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that’s your job: to bless. You’ll be a blessing and also get a blessing.”**

Actually, this passage names some of the characteristics that make up our inward beauty. There are things like the ability to get along with others, the capacity for caring for those who are hurting, humility, forgiveness, and even more that goes unnamed. Let’s think about how we might spend as much time and energy cultivating those traits as we do trying to make the best of our physical appearance.

Frankly, I think it all begins with humility. Many of us confuse what humility really is. It does not mean that we become doormats for others to walk on, nor does it mean that we think of ourselves as a rotten person. Those are the kinds of things that come from having poor self-esteem, but they’re not facets of humility.

To be humble is defined in the following way: **having or showing a consciousness of one’s defects or shortcomings; not proud; modest; unpretentious.** By its very nature, humility implies that we have an understanding of ourselves as neither better nor worse than anyone else, being aware that all of us have our strengths and talents, as well as our weaknesses and dark sides. That’s what it means to be human, and we’re all part of the human race.

When we are humble, we don’t get on our high horse, or try to lord it over other people. We don’t pretend to be something we’re not. We don’t play games, and try to impress people with our skill or prowess. Benjamin Whichcote put it like this: **“None are so empty as those who are full of themselves.”** Most of us recognize people when they’re being braggarts, and are fully aware that it’s mostly words, and nothing more.

When we talk about being humble, we are talking about just being who we are, honestly who we are—no pretenses. My hunch is that being capable of humility has to do with knowing who we are at the core of our being, and living true to that core. I believe it begins and ends with knowing that we are God’s creation, and our value and worth come naturally to us

as children of God. We have no need to try to be more than that.

If we can come to grips with ourselves as members of God's family, then it seems to me that some of the other elements of inward beauty will come more easily. For instance, being humble almost automatically fills us with more compassion for others, because we walk so many of the same paths. It's often said, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." We all walk the slippery slope of life, and a turn this way instead of that can make all the difference. Once we're aware of just how close we are in walking the same path as others who are less fortunate, the more we can identify and care for them. That's compassion—having empathy, trying to understand what it's like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes.

Humility is the starting point for developing a different attitude, a different perspective on life. We fully understand that we're not in control of the dips and curves that we experience in life. Much of it just happens. A couple of months ago, we talked about the reality that the only thing over which we have control is our attitude. We cannot control what happens to us, in most instances, but we can steer how we respond to what occurs.

Our attitude is basically our responsibility. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "A man over 40 is responsible for his own face." That's because how we look is a result of the thoughts we are thinking and the attitude we're cultivating. So, it seems to me that another basic part of nurturing our inner beauty is developing a more hope-filled, positive outlook on life, trusting in a future that we cannot fully define, and yet still trusting.

Being humble and yet confident may seem to be rather strange bed partners, but I think they go hand in hand. We can be ourselves and have confidence in ourselves because of our faith, our trust in God. And when we uncover that sense of hope and confidence, we'll find that we can relate more openly and honestly with one another. Instead of trying to "one up" another person, we just might listen more closely and try a bit harder to understand.

Instead of entrenching and demanding to have our own way, we might become a bit more willing to compromise and share the journey more equitably. It means that we're willing to let go of our own hurt and bitterness, and be the first to offer forgiveness. At the same time, it means being able to apologize and ask for forgiveness when we know we've hurt someone unnecessarily.

There's really a lot to reflect on when it comes to cultivating our inward beauty, but I believe that when it starts with letting God's love fill us, we just might find that we are more compassionate, more aware, more positive and enthusiastic, more grace-filled people. That's the light of our inner selves shining into the world and making it a brighter place.

How about it? Shall we focus on developing our inward beauty in 2009? I hope so.

Closing:

Someone by the name of Ruby Dee once said, "The kind of beauty I want most is the hard-to-get kind that comes from within—strength, courage, dignity."

Yes, and humility, honesty, compassion, and more.

So, as we leave here this morning, I'm hoping that we might revise some of our New Year's resolutions to include cultivating our inner beauty. Are we willing?

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.