

Set-Apart
Femininity

Leslie Ludy



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Names have been changed in some of the stories featured in this work to preserve the privacy of individuals and their families.

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Sacred Intent

unlocking femininity's spectacular purpose

1

It happened when I was 14.

Somewhere between encountering the sultry Victoria's Secret model in a push-up bra and thong and reading the "Total Body Makeover" article (complete with a three-page bikini shopping guide) in the new issue of my favorite magazine, I made the decision. Somewhere between watching a beautiful young pop star swivel-hip on stage as thousands of guys lustfully cheered and living vicariously through a perfectly proportioned actress as she found true love with a hot guy in the latest romantic comedy, I decided what I wanted to become...an alluring young woman.

It's not that I wanted to be seen as trashy or loose. But I wanted to be beautiful enough that guys would drool over me. I wanted to be the kind of girl who looked incredible in a swimsuit—the kind of girl who somehow achieved flawless skin, perfect hair, pouty lips, and dazzling white teeth while shrugging the whole thing off with an "I know I'm gorgeous but I don't really care" attitude.

It was more than just having the right look. I also needed an alluring personality. I wanted to be the kind of girl who could playfully tease cute guys just enough to toy with their desires and keep them

constantly interested in me. I wanted to be the kind of girl who exuded the witty humor and endearing charm of a TV sitcom character—the kind of girl who was completely self-assured and self-confident in every situation.

I knew I had a long way to go to achieve my dream.

Back in sixth grade, I had been informed—rather rudely—by Sean Wyatt, the unofficial kingpin of Crestview Elementary, that I was (and I quote) “the sickest, most disgusting-looking girl I’ve ever seen!” Sean had then climbed up on the orange cafeteria table and danced around, scratching his underarms and screeching like a monkey as he pointed at me and announced to everyone present that: “She’s so ugly, she belongs in a zoo!”

Sean’s crowd of followers had snorted with laughter and joined in with even more creative put-downs like “You were so ugly when you were born that your mom tried to switch you with another kid at the hospital!”

I had cried for so long that night that my parents had resorted to the only thing that could possibly cheer me up—a strawberry milkshake from McDonald’s.

Though I realized Sean’s comments were somewhat exaggerated, I also knew that I was no beauty. I was pale and gangly with thick glasses and crooked teeth and frizzy hair and heavy black eyebrows that looked like they wanted to overtake my entire face. My clothes were never cool (I wanted Guess jeans, but my mom made me wear Lee’s, which I was convinced were the source of most of my sixth-grade woes.) And I was awkward and uncomfortable around people—especially around guys. So it’s no wonder that I became an easy target for Sean in his theater of cruelty.

His mocking words—along with the disdain of many other guys growing up—convinced me that I was ugly and worthless. And it created a pain inside of me that was almost too intense to bear.

Over the next few years, I worked hard to discard the label of “undesirable.”

I chucked my glasses in exchange for contacts. I started wearing makeup—reasoning that if my eyelids were neon blue, maybe people wouldn't notice my too-thick eyebrows or crooked teeth. I bought the skimpiest clothes I could get past my parents. (At times I would leave the house in baggy sweats to conceal the miniskirt and halter top I was wearing underneath—the sweats came off once I got to school.) I spent countless hours wrestling with my hair, marveling at the many wonders of aerosol hairspray. I took Victoria's advice and started wearing slinky underwear and push-up bras. I stopped eating French fries because I was worried my thighs were getting fat.

And even though all of my efforts did eventually attract some approving attention from guys and put me into a more popular category at school, by the age of 14 I realized I still didn't possess the kind of allure that the world would truly applaud. I started to wonder if I ever would.

I wasn't confident and witty like the star of my favorite TV show. I didn't look like the chic and bronzed-skinned bikini model on the cover of my favorite magazine. I couldn't belt out tunes about the agony of love while lying seductively on the sand in a sexy music video like my favorite female pop star. And when the love of my life, Brandon, dumped me for a prettier girl after I'd given him my heart, the long list of everything I lacked mercilessly slapped me in the face even harder.

To become the kind of young woman that men desired and the world exalted seemed almost like an unattainable dream. But it also seemed that if I ever *could* achieve that standard, I would finally be fulfilled, secure, and happy. I would finally be truly loved and desired by the opposite sex. I would finally see my dreams come true—if I could only become that kind of beautiful, confident young woman that seemed to be everywhere but in the mirror.

As I journeyed through my young adult years, I found that there were many places I could go for help and advice in my pursuit of becoming alluring. Trendy clothing stores lured me in their doors with posters of doe-eyed, effortlessly gorgeous young women who also happened to

be wearing the latest fashions hanging on the racks inside. Eye-catching magazines beckoned me to open them with bold article titles such as “Best-Kept Secrets to Becoming Sexy!” and “How to Win ANY Guy!” and “Get Your Best Body in Three Easy Steps!” Movie stars demonstrated the art of seduction as they flirted and teased and conquered men’s hearts on the big screen. Popular singers taught me all about the mysteries of love and attraction through their angst-ridden tunes.

The more I listened to the incessant voice of pop culture, the more I pursued their standard for feminine beauty and appeal. I threw myself into one passionate, romantic fling after the next, trying to model the careless behavior of sitcom characters. I flirted strategically with any cute guy in my path, trying to follow the advice of every magazine on the grocery store shelf. I dressed like the models in the store windows at the mall. I obsessed over my hair, skin, body, and wardrobe like all the TV commercials urged me to.

And yet the more I tried to make myself appealing, the farther away from perfection I felt.

Elusive Allure

Only 2 percent of women think they are beautiful according to a recent survey.¹ That reality is a little strange because beauty has never been easier to come by than it is today. The plastic surgery business is booming. Beauty products are boundless. We are surrounded by a plethora of books, magazines, and TV shows that provide us with all the secrets and techniques we need to look, act, and feel like a confident, beautiful young woman. We have all the tools we need. And most of us spend a huge portion of our time trying to make ourselves alluring.

Yet in an ironic twist, we still feel ugly. We still feel worthless. We still feel like we aren’t “there” yet.

A graphic designer for a major clothing label once told me, “In real life no model really looks as perfect as what you see in clothing ads or on catalog covers. We digitally alter her photo. We remove several

inches from her waist and thighs. We enhance her chest size. We air-brush her skin.” The world lifts up a standard for beauty that is literally impossible to achieve in real life.

As women, the desire to be beautiful is innate. We long to be seen as attractive, appealing, and desirable. We dream of capturing the heart of a noble prince with our stunning beauty, like the princesses in our childhood fairy tales. But our longing to be loved and wooed by a heroic groom didn’t originate with Cinderella—it’s actually a Biblical concept. The entire Bible is a beautiful love story between Christ and His bride—drawing us, wooing us, and loving us the way we have always dreamed. Song of Solomon, for example, is just one of many beautiful portrayals of our heavenly Bridegroom tenderly pursuing His bride. Jesus is the only One who can truly satisfy the deepest desires of our hearts. And yet, most of us turn to everything *but* Him in a desperate attempt to find the approval we crave. And pop culture preys upon our longings for love like a relentless vulture. They keep dangling the carrot temptingly in front of us, urging us to spend our time, money, and energy pursuing the “next great thing” that will bring us one step closer to the dream.

And all too often we fall for it. We buy the clothes. We read the magazines. We watch the commercials. We let the moviemakers and the fashion industry and the advertising executives define who we become as young women.

Of course, many young women are a bit more subtle in their pursuit of beauty than I was at 14. Most of us don’t want to admit—even to ourselves—just how consumed we are with making ourselves appealing. We come up with clever excuses and disguises for our obsessions.

Modern feminism has done its job well, reminding us that we shouldn’t seek the approval of the opposite sex, convincing us that everything we do should be only for ourselves and no one else. So, presumably, we wear slinky thongs and super-push-up bras not because they make us attractive to men, but because they make *us* feel good about *ourselves*. We spend hours at the mall snatching up the latest

sexy trends because we are “comfortable” enough with our bodies to carelessly showcase them to the world. Our role-models are anorexic actresses who confidently declare that they are happy and fulfilled and not concerned about what anyone thinks of them.

We obey the tyranny of pop culture under the guise that we are free to do whatever we want, whatever makes *us* feel good. As modern young women, we have deluded ourselves into thinking we are empowered, but in reality we couldn't be more ensnared. We convince ourselves that we are making our own decisions, that we are listening to our own voice, but in truth we are like putty in the hands of the culture's warped agenda.

Young women today are supposed to be the most liberated, independent, confident, and fulfilled of any in history. But we are a desperate, lonely, insecure, and hopeless lot—plagued by eating disorders, abusive relationships, emotional breakdowns, and sexual chaos.

We've been looking for beauty in the wrong place. And our incessant search for beauty has stripped us of all that is truly beautiful.

Searching for Self-Worth

“You are special! You are unique! You have value!” Kevin Richards' face was full of sincerity and passion as he spoke the words. I was 14, and our entire youth group was gathered under a big oak tree on the front lawn of our church to hear Kevin's inspiring “devo” (his cool slang term for a devotional lesson). Today's lesson was on self-esteem.

“Now I know that the world is always trying to tell you that you aren't good enough,” Kevin continued. “But in God's eyes, you are good enough! He wants you to feel good about yourself.”

Beside me some husky football players shuffled awkwardly on the grass. A few girls behind me started whispering to each other. None of us really knew how to respond to Kevin's motivational talk. Everyone on the lawn that day was battling with intense insecurity, but it wasn't the kind of thing that you talked about or even acknowledged at the age of 14.

Kevin wasn't deterred by our lack of response. "I want all of you to go home today," he said earnestly, "and look in the mirror. And I want you to say to your reflection, 'I love you!'"

At that, most of the group broke into embarrassed laughter. Kevin held up his hands and smiled wryly. "Hey, guys, don't knock it 'til you try it!" Then his face grew serious again. "Listen, I know it is easy to laugh at a message like this. But this is serious to God. He wants you to learn how to love yourself."

Love yourself. It was a message that I heard often, in many different forms, throughout my young adult life. "It is important to feel good about who *you* are!"

If that were true, I reasoned, I was pursuing all the right things. Most of my time and energy was devoted to feeling good about *me*. That was why I pored over all those beauty and fashion magazines. That was why I spent so much time obsessing in front of the mirror. That was why I rushed out to the mall every weekend to buy the latest trends.

So why did I feel worse than ever about myself?

A conversation with my small-group leader—a pretty college freshman named Staci—brought yet another perspective. "God didn't design all women to look like the cover of *Vogue* magazine," she told our group of girls as we sat in a circle on the youth room floor. "He made you beautiful just the way you are."

Staci encouraged us not to obsess over our bodies or lament that we didn't look like *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models. Rather, we were told we should learn to find and appreciate our own unique beauty and not buy into the world's standards.

"What about wearing makeup and cute clothes?" a 15-year-old named Veronica wanted to know. "Are we just supposed to ignore how we look?"

"Absolutely not," Staci replied confidently. "It is good to take care of your body; it's God's temple. Wear makeup. Wear the right clothes. Make the best of what He has given you. Just don't worry if you don't

look like a Victoria's Secret billboard. Everyone has their own unique beauty. Accept yourself the way you are."

It seemed like a healthy perspective. Each week we girls would spend hours shopping for the right clothes, improving our skin and bodies, and envying TV stars as they flaunted their perfect figures. But on Sundays and Wednesday nights, we would be gallantly reminded, "You are beautiful the way you are!" This became an unofficial mantra that was chanted to girls in Christian circles, presumably to keep us from ending up with an eating disorder or plastic surgery fetish because we had bought into the world's impossible standards for beauty.

But in truth, it was about as effective as telling a dehydrated desert wanderer to declare "I am *not* thirsty!" just as his tongue dries up and sticks to the roof of his mouth. Eventually, his desperate desire for water becomes unbearable no matter how hard he tries to convince himself that he doesn't need it.

No matter how many times we told ourselves "I am beautiful the way I am!" we were still entrenched in a world that relentlessly declared otherwise. And our desperate need to be appealing to the world was still there, no matter how many times we tried to ignore it. Like a thirsty desert traveler imbibing water, we slurped up the culture's messages, even as we denied we were doing it.

The Guy Problem

Such is the dilemma of all too many Christian young women today. We are told to appreciate our own unique beauty and accept ourselves for who we are. Meanwhile, we are constantly assaulted by a world that insists we aren't alluring enough—that we need to change our bodies, our clothes, and our personalities in order to be more appealing. And it's not just the fashion industry and Hollywood that are to blame.

Guys are a huge part of the problem.

The same culture that trains us as young women to become sexy, sultry, and seductive also trains men to lust after women who possess those traits. "Guys think about sex every 3.5 seconds" is the message

proclaimed by television, movies, and modern psychology. “Whenever a guy talks with a girl, he’s not really thinking about the conversation. He’s imagining what she looks like naked. It’s just the way men are. Guys will be guys.” This is what boys hear from the time they are old enough to even notice the opposite sex. They begin to believe that being lustful cavemen is the way they were created. It is implied that if a guy isn’t consumed by sexual desires and erotic fantasies, he is completely abnormal.

Most of today’s guys—even Christian ones—have bought into Hollywood’s standards of beauty, drooling over sex queens and scorning all things pure, innocent, and uncorrupted. And living among them, we become convinced that we must scrape and claw to be noticed by guys, to cheapen ourselves to become desirable to anything male that moves.

We can tell ourselves that we appreciate our own unique beauty. We can say that we’ve learned to accept ourselves just the way we are. But the moment we walk out our front doors, we see clusters of guys drooling over any skimpily dressed, well-proportioned female who passes by. We watch them lustfully grin at sultry, bikini-clad models on the covers of magazines. We hear them talk about the incredible bodies of the hottest young singers or actresses on TV. We even catch many of them sneaking frequent peeks at Internet porn. And we start to question whether our own “special and unique qualities” will ever really be enough to turn a man’s head, let alone win his heart.

Brittany, a spunky college sophomore, recently told me, “I want to be patient and wait for a Christlike guy. But I am afraid that if I don’t throw myself at every guy who comes along, I’ll never find someone. If I don’t play the game, I’m afraid that no one will ever want me.”

Brittany echoes the secret fears of countless thousands of girls in our generation. Telling ourselves we are “beautiful the way we are” doesn’t convince us that a guy will one day appreciate our “unique”

beauty. It doesn't quench our desperate longings to be found attractive and desirable.

Our lives reflect our inward desperation.

The world beckons us to become more appealing by imitating pop-culture trends and movie stars, while the church encourages us to love and accept ourselves the way we are. But neither message provides the true solution to our inner crisis.

We long to be found beautiful—to feel the gentle caress of an adoring man who is dazzled by our loveliness. But most of us have either given up on that dream altogether, or we have given up our innocence in the futile pursuit of it.

As women we were born with an intrinsic longing for our femininity to be appreciated. But in this world of unattainable standards for female perfection, is it possible to become a breathtakingly beautiful princess who will ravish the heart of a prince? Is it possible to not merely accept ourselves the way we are, but to actually become as spectacularly lovely, appealing, and valuable as our feminine hearts desire?

The answer is a resounding yes.

But just as lasting and fulfilling romance is not found in the place that most of us search for it, neither is feminine beauty found in the place that most of us seek it. There is only one path that leads to true beauty. It is a narrow, rocky, obscure road that is hidden from the eyes of most. There are only a few in every generation who find it. But those who do are the most blessed and radiant of all women.

Hollow Beauty

MARIA'S STORY A top fashion model—let's call her "Maria"—is considered by many to be a positive role model for Christian girls because she has taken a public stand against premarital sex (never mind all of her practically naked, sex-goddess poses that are lustfully viewed by millions of men). Maria has what most young women long

for—worldly beauty, sex appeal, and the rapt attention of every guy she meets. She has the kind of life most of us would envy—men, money, fame, glamour, and luxury at her fingertips. She even has a relationship with God. Maria is a devout church-goer and is outspoken about premarital abstinence (which has earned her the title “the world’s most voluptuous virgin” among the secular media).

But her first love is worldly applause. Her first and foremost pursuit is worldly beauty. She has gone to incredible lengths to fulfill the world’s standard for feminine perfection. Everything about her perfect proportions and flawless skin has been artificially gained. “Everything about me is fake!” she admits. “From my hair to my nose to my toes.” Then, as if suddenly struck by the emptiness of it all, she adds, “Even my heart is fake.”²

Maria has the kind of life that most Christian girls are desperately seeking—a relationship with God combined with worldly applause, comfort, pleasure, and male attention. But for one who has supposedly reached the pinnacles of feminine beauty, the desires of her heart have not been met. Her relationship with God is only an afterthought to her first pursuit—worldly allure and approval. And even though the world applauds her beauty, she does not know true love, fulfillment, or joy.

Maria represents the path that the majority of modern Christian young women have chosen—a life built around the pursuit of worldly allure, beauty, and popularity and fitting a relationship with God in wherever it’s convenient. But, as Maria’s life demonstrates, even if we somehow attain the kind of worldly beauty we are seeking, we still will not find the kind of beauty that our hearts are desperately searching for.

Imagine having the kind of beauty that doesn’t need to be “propped up” by artificial means, a beauty that doesn’t merely last a few years and then fade with age, a beauty that will be cherished and appreciated for a lifetime.

If *that* kind of beauty could be found, even Maria would have to be intrigued.

The Secret Source of True Beauty

The world proclaims that female beauty is gained through diet pills, tanning booths, breast augmentation, and liposuction. Modern psychology and well-meaning Christian voices insist that beauty comes from within and that we merely need to love and accept ourselves the way we are.

If we pursue the world's version of beauty, we might end up with momentary applause, but like Maria, we will have only propped-up, fleeting beauty on the outside and a hollow, fake heart on the inside. If we take Kevin Richard's advice and learn to "love ourselves" and "embrace our own unique inner beauty," we find merely a cover-up, not a cure, for the deepest longings of our feminine hearts, like putting a Band-Aid over a staph infection and hoping it will go away.

Neither the world's version of beauty nor the modern self-esteem message truly fulfills our longing to shine with enchanting grace and princess-like dignity. And neither avenue meets that deeper inner desire to radiate with feminine beauty that never fades.

But there is another kind of womanly beauty—one that we don't hear much about in today's world. It's the dazzling loveliness of *set-apart femininity*.

Set-apart femininity exudes a beauty that is not of this world; it's the spectacular radiance of a woman completely transformed by the Author of all things lovely and pure.

Set-apart femininity, contrary to what you might be thinking, is not stodgy and grim-faced with drab, shapeless clothes, librarian glasses, and a 20-pound Bible under one arm. It's not hiding from society or shunning the opposite sex.

Set-apart femininity blends the classic womanly grace and dignity of an Audrey Hepburn with the sacrificial, poured-out-for-Christ lifestyle of an Amy Carmichael. It's true feminine beauty merged with absolute abandonment to Jesus Christ. It's the sparkling, vibrant, world-altering, Christlike version of femininity that your King created you to exude.

This kind of beauty is not found in the pages of fashion magazines. It's not found in the "love yourself" mantras of the modern self-esteem messages.

The spectacular sparkle of set-apart femininity is found through absolute abandonment to the Author of all true beauty. It's found by exchanging a life consumed with self for a life consumed with Jesus Christ, by trading the desire to be attractive to this world for the longing to be attractive to Him alone. Find a woman who cares about nothing but loving, serving, honoring, and glorifying Jesus Christ, and you will see who truly is "the fairest of them all."

Heavenly Beauty

JACKIE'S STORY Jackie Pullenger's life is the opposite of Maria's in just about every way. At 20 years old, she encountered Jesus Christ. He asked her to give up her family, comforts, and educational pursuits to lay down her life for some of the most destitute, dirty, and depraved people in the world—and she willingly obeyed. For more than 30 years she has lived among drug lords, heroine addicts, and prostitutes in an area that until recently was called the "Walled City of Hong Kong"—a sordid haven for appalling squalor, crime, and debauchery. While Maria spends her time trying the latest trends in makeup and clothes, Jackie stays up all night walking the streets and proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. While Maria is wined and dined by athletes and movie stars, Jackie shares her bowl of rice with hungry children. While Maria sleeps on silk sheets in luxury hotels, Jackie shares her cramped living quarters with 20 homeless people at once. Jackie even shares her bedroom with ex-prostitutes and drug addicts.

When I hear Maria speak, I am struck by her hollow, empty, unfulfilled life. When I hear Jackie speak, I am riveted by her stunning beauty, radiance, joy, and confidence. Maria supposedly has the life that all women want. But after a closer look, it's clear that Jackie, not Maria, has the life we all should envy.

Jackie is passionately in love with Christ. Because of her sacrificial devotion to Him, thousands of the most hopeless people in the world have been radically transformed, renewed, and set free. And when she speaks, it is obvious that she has something very few of us have ever tasted. “You may have your own bedroom,” she says, “but I know God’s grace.”³ While other women take delight in comfort, entertainment, romance, and pleasure, Jackie’s treasures are found in an entirely different kingdom. Her life is straight after the pattern of the New Testament—“poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things” (2 Corinthians 6:10). And as a result, she possesses the glorious radiance of a woman truly set apart for her King. Jackie does not have the applause of this world. But she has the applause of Jesus Christ, and to her that’s all that matters.

Against all reason, against all odds, it is Jackie’s life of poured-out devotion—not Maria’s life of self-serving pleasure—that brings the fulfillment, contentment, and lasting beauty that we as women are desperately seeking.

A Whole New Pattern

Amy Carmichael (one of my heroes whose story I told in *Authentic Beauty*) once wrote about her frustrating search for set-apart women to join her in her ministry of rescuing Indian children from being sold into prostitution. “I wrote to all the pastors in the region, asking if they had any women wholly devoted to our Lord and separate in spirit from the world who were likely to be free for this work,” she said. The pastors all replied the same, “Not only have we no women like this, but we do not know of even one woman of the kind you want.”⁴

Sadly, what was true about young Christian femininity a hundred years ago is still true today. “Christian” young women are a dime a dozen in our country. But to find a young woman who is wholly devoted to Christ and separate in spirit from the world is rare indeed.

If we were given the choice between Maria’s comfortable life of ease

and worldly applause and Jackie's difficult life of sacrifice and worldly indifference, which would we choose? If we were to be honest, most of us would admit that it sounds far more appealing to "have our cake and eat it too," like Maria does. She goes to church, believes in saving sex until marriage, and claims to have a relationship with God. Yet she also has everything our selfish, sinful, pleasure-loving natures crave. It's a great combination; living a life of ease, comfort, and popularity, and still going to heaven in the end.

Jackie's life, to most of us, seems a little too extreme, a little too uncomfortable, a little too obscure. Why would we deliberately choose to give up all the pleasures and attractions of this world and live among the destitute and dying? Why can't we just serve God from the comfort of our air-conditioned homes?

It's a lot easier to build our lives around the pursuit of worldly applause and selfish pleasure and just fit Christ in somewhere on the side than to radically pour out our lives in sacrificial devotion to Him.

But the reason that we as modern young Christian women are so insecure, lonely, and unfulfilled is because we have chosen Maria's lifestyle instead of Jackie's. Maybe we aren't posing in racy underwear, but we are pursuing the very same shallow beauty, hollow approval of the world, and selfish pleasures, all the while proclaiming to be representatives of Christ.

Our lives do not reflect the stunning beauty of Jesus Christ; they reflect the shallow, imitation, pop-culture appeal of the world's system.

We live in a Christian world where Paris and Britney set the standard (or lack thereof) even for Christian girls, where oral sex is referred to by many as "Christian sex," and where Abercrombie catalogs, though labeled by many as "soft porn," strongly influence what Christian girls wear and how we wear it.

We live in a world where 200 Christian girls from a quiet church-going community had to be medically treated by the health department

for an outbreak of syphilis because of their secret lives of sex and orgies—many of them admitting to having 50 or 100 different sex partners and engaging in sex acts with three guys at one time.⁵

We live in a world where radical abandonment to Christ means, at best, maintaining *technical* virginity until marriage and possibly going on a short-term mission trip every couple of years with iPod, cell phone, and *InStyle* magazine in tow.

A few months ago I listened as a group of “all-out-for-God” young women enthusiastically told me the name of their favorite movie. I knew which movie they were talking about. It included lengthy and graphic sex scenes, glorified rebellion against authority, and glamorized lust and betrayal—but it had “such a sweet ending!” and the girls had watched it many times. (Important side note: I looked up this movie on a parents’ movie guide website that described all the questionable content in detail. Not only did the “sex/nudity” descriptions for this movie take up an entire page, they were far too graphic for me to even consider including in this book.)

Forgive me if I seem to be ranting, but I believe there is so much more to being a Christian young woman than what we have settled for today. Christian femininity has sunk to dismally low standards, and we are evidencing the consequences of our compromise in rocky romances, stressful family relationships, mediocre marriages, empty spirituality, and unhappy, unfulfilled lives.

I speak from personal experience when I say that our standards are dismally low. I was raised in church and accepted Christ into my heart as a child at vacation Bible school. Growing up, I knew that God had certain standards I was supposed to meet. And the last thing I wanted to do was to get on God’s bad side. I took my Christianity seriously. I wanted to be pleasing to God. But I also wanted to be pleasing to the world. From the time I was 12 or 13, I began listening to lackadaisical Christian messages that justified my preoccupation with selfishness and pleasure. Fortunately for me, these were not hard to find.

“Five Ways to Have Fun with Your Friends” was the title of an

article in a Christian magazine for young women that my parents had subscribed to on my behalf in the hopes that it would be a good influence on me. The article gave suggestions such as going to the mall and seeing who could buy the most creative thing for five dollars, staying up all night having a chick-flick marathon, and holding a lip-synching contest to your favorite pop songs. In other words, spending hours at the mall listening to countless messages of “here’s how to be sexy” and “here’s the latest thing that will make you cool!” was perfectly acceptable. Drinking in Hollywood’s philosophy of romance and femininity was no big deal. And imitating a pop star’s sultry rendition of a song about love-gone-wrong was just harmless fun.

“Which Hollywood celebrity would you rather be?” quizzed my Christian devotional for girls. “Julia Roberts, Catherine Zeta-Jones, or Sandra Bullock?” In other words, it was perfectly fine to look to sexy starlets as my role models for successful womanhood.

My youth group Bible study leader often challenged me and the other girls not to become discouraged if we didn’t look like the girls on the cover of *Seventeen*. But she never challenged us not to read *Seventeen* in the first place.

Modern Christianity focused on helping me live at least somewhat morally in the midst of all the pop-culture attractions that constantly bombarded my senses. But it didn’t challenge me to shift my affections away from pop-culture attractions altogether.

Like countless young women today, I lived with one foot in the world and the other in the murky waters of Christian compromise. I lived my life only two or three steps ahead of the culture’s standards.

When it came to clothes—I dressed seductively, just not quite as slutty as the girls on the Guess jeans ads. When it came to role models—I revered popular young singers or movie stars who said they were Christians. (What did it matter if you really couldn’t tell by their lives?) When it came to magazines—I read the style and beauty articles and (usually) skipped the ones that justified premarital sex. When it came to pastimes—I watched the same movies and listened to the

same music as everyone else and tried to overlook all the profanity and perversion. When it came to guys—I flirted and cavorted like everyone else but made sure it was mostly with guys who claimed to be Christians and went to youth group. When it came to relationships—I gave myself emotionally and physically to one fling after another, but saved my “technical” virginity until marriage.

I was a “Christian” young woman. But I was not a set-apart young woman.

Still to this day, I am flooded with gratitude that God did not leave me in that state of mediocrity. Gently, patiently, and lovingly, He began to open my eyes to see how far from being His princess of purity I really was. And He began to show me a glorious new pattern for my life as a young woman—*His pattern*. It’s a pattern that is continually being built and shaped within my life, even to this day. It’s the pattern of set-apart femininity, and it’s God’s sacred intent for each of our lives.

This book doesn’t present a comfortable message. It won’t show you how to live a self-indulgent life with a little Christian morality tacked on. It won’t give you tips on how to dress a tad less sexy than the Abercrombie billboards or how to get the attention of that hot Christian guy without coming across as desperate.

This book presents a vision for a whole different kind of Christian femininity than what we see all around us today. And if you allow it to, it will awaken you to a whole new way to live that will change your existence forever.

It *is* possible, even in today’s world, to possess that spectacular, radiant, lasting feminine loveliness that we’ve dreamed about since childhood. And not only is it possible, it is God’s sacred intent for each and every one of His daughters.

Joining the Ranks

What is the secret to great living? Entire separation to Christ and devotion to Him. Thus speaks every man and woman whose

life has made more than a passing flicker in the spiritual realm.
It is the life that has no time for trifling that counts.⁶

—AMY CARMICHAEL

History is filled with amazing examples of stunning set-apart women, wholly devoted to Jesus Christ. Their awe-inspiring examples of radiant femininity put modern young women (myself included!) to shame. Here are some of my favorites.

Vibia Perpetua, one of the earliest Christian martyrs, was thrown into the arena among wild beasts and then killed with a gladiator's sword because of her faith in Christ. A beautiful young woman of high education and noble birth, she gladly gave up all worldly comforts and applause for the cause of Christ. The mother of an infant son whom she dearly loved, she could have obtained life and freedom simply by denying her faith in Christ. But, as it says in Revelation 12:11, she loved not her life unto death. Greatly rejoicing that she was counted worthy to suffer and die for her Savior, Vibia went to face the wild beast's attack singing a psalm with a joyful, radiant countenance. Walking confidently to her death, as Christ walked to Calvary, she was given victory over her senses and felt no pain, only a deep oneness with God. Just before she died, she exhorted her brother, who was watching, to stand fast in the faith. Like many other martyrs, her blood became the seed of the early Christian Church. Because of her courageous spirit and sublime faith, the Church drew in countless people who could not ignore the hope and heroism displayed in the life and death of this radiant daughter of the King.⁷

Elizabeth Fry, a young English wife and mother of 11 children in the late 1700s, became the sole instrument of prison reform for an entire continent as she followed the leading of her King Jesus. At the age of 17, she first encountered Jesus Christ, and from that moment on she never opened her eyes day or night without her first waking thought being how best she might serve her Lord. One day in 1813, she went to visit a women's prison in her town. When the doors closed

behind her, she felt she had entered a den of wild beasts. The inhumane conditions, obscene language, foul odors, suffering, and depravity of the prisoners left her heart aching. From that moment on, she resolved to be Christ's hands and feet to the needy prisoners in her country.

Drawing supernatural strength from Christ, she restored dignity and humanity to thousands of filthy and depraved prisoners, she visited kings and magistrates, she petitioned courts, and she proposed new ordinances that completely transformed the prison system in Europe, all the while being an excellent and attentive mother to her large family. Because of her tireless life of sacrifice, thousands of prisoners were saved, both physically and spiritually. Hundreds embraced Christ because of her example. Even kings and government officials were forever altered by Elizabeth's life. An early American congressman who observed her work wrote this of her: "I have seen Elizabeth Fry and have witnessed her miraculous effects of true Christianity upon the most depraved of human beings. The wretched outcasts have been tamed and subdued by the Christian eloquence of Mrs. Fry. Nothing but God can effect such a miracle."⁸

Gladys Aylward was 25 when she met Christ and offered her life to Him fully and completely. He placed a heavy burden upon her heart for the suffering and unreached people of war-torn China. But she had no money, did not speak the language, and was unqualified to go alone to a dangerous and hostile land. Then one day she heard a challenge from her Lord, and she knew she had to go exactly where He was calling her—to China. At the age of 26, she boarded a train to China with only a small handful of coins in her pocket and embarked upon one of the most extraordinary adventures of all time.

Over the next 20 years, Gladys preached the Gospel to thousands of Chinese men and women, tended to hundreds of wounded soldiers during the war, single-handedly stopped a deadly riot at a men's prison, cared for the sick and lepers, and adopted more than a hundred orphans, often going without food so that they could survive. During the Japanese invasion, she was on the "dead or alive most wanted list"

and at times narrowly escaped pursuers seeking to end her life—her clothing riddled with bullet holes.

She led 200 orphans on a six-week journey across the mountains to bring them to safety; a journey so exhausting that she lapsed into a coma as soon as the task was completed. Gladys's life of complete abandon to Jesus Christ literally changed the face of a nation. At the end of her life, she wrote: "My heart is full of praise that one so insignificant, uneducated, and ordinary in every way could be used to His glory for the blessing of His people in poor persecuted China." Though ordinary and insignificant, Gladys lived one of the most spectacular displays of triumphant femininity this world has ever seen, all because she staked everything upon the faithfulness of her God.⁹

Sabina Wurmbrand was the young wife of a pastor and mother of a little boy during the Communist takeover in Romania in 1949. At a pastor's convention, Sabina sat next to her husband as one Christian leader after the next walked onto the stage and blasphemed the name of Jesus Christ, caving to the demands of the Communist officials sitting in the front row. Her heart began to burn within her. She was passionately in love with Jesus Christ and could not stand to hear such things spoken about Him by His own people. She turned to her husband. "Will you not wipe the spit from the face of Christ?" she asked him. Richard pointed at the Communist officers. "If I stand up and speak against their agenda, they will kill me," he told her. Sabina did not hesitate. "I would rather be married to a dead man," she replied, "than to a coward." It was the infusion of strength Richard needed. He rose to his feet, sparked by the passion of his wife, and thunderously spoke truth in the midst of lies.

Sabina loved her husband and little boy. But she loved Jesus even more. She was willing to lay down every bit of personal joy, happiness, and security to see His name glorified. The next 12 years of Sabina's life were excruciatingly difficult because of the stand she had taken that day. Richard was imprisoned and tortured, and she had no way of knowing whether he was dead or alive. She was thrown into prison

herself for four years, her little boy forced to fend for himself on the streets. When she was released, she was unable to buy or sell because of her status as the wife of a pastor and relied only on the kindness of others to survive. But to Sabina, it was more than worth it. No matter what hardships she faced, she never ceased to shine with joy, contentment, and Christlike beauty. She spoke of Jesus to anyone who would listen, even at risk of her own safety. Thousands discovered the transforming power of Christ through Sabina's incredible example of courage and devotion. To Sabina, every night of hunger, pain, and separation from her family was more than worth it. Jesus was everything to her. And her life was a glorious display of passionate devotion to Him at any cost.¹⁰

Answering the Sacred Call

The sacred call God placed upon these incredible women's lives is the very same call He has placed upon yours and mine. Only one question remains. Are we willing to lay down everything else and take up His set-apart commission?

God's sacred intent for us goes far beyond just saving sex until marriage, wearing one-piece swimsuits instead of skimpy string bikinis, or idolizing Christian bands instead of secular ones. It is not just making sure we tack on some Christian morality to our self-indulgent lives.

His sacred intent for you and for me is nothing short of absolute abandonment to Jesus Christ, entire separation from the pollution of the world, and ardent worship of our King with every breath we take.

Yes, it's a huge vision—one that is contrary to everything our culture presents. In our modern world, we as young women seem to be presented with only two options for our femininity—we can either embrace the sensual, sexed-up version of womanhood glorified by pop culture, or we can go the opposite direction and trade in perfume and makeup for grit, grunge, and guy-like behavior.

But both of these options cause us to completely miss out on the

glorious pattern God designed for our femininity. We were created to shine with heavenly beauty, to radiate with Christlike feminine loveliness, and to sparkle with the lily-white purity of our Prince. We were created to be set apart for Him.

As you read this book, you will likely hear plenty of voices in the background screaming that it is impossible to achieve this set-apart standard. But the good news is—you don't have to achieve it on your own. As Oswald Chambers says,

When we deliberately choose to obey God, He will tax the remotest star and the last grain of sand to assist us with all His almighty power.¹¹

Whatever your version of femininity has been up to this moment—God desires to offer you hope and a glorious future. Jesus Christ can take a life that has been bruised, rejected, or squandered and make it completely new. He can empower a weak and helpless life to rise up and conquer. No matter where you've been or what you've done or how far from Him you feel right now—He can transform you into a radiant, victorious, world-changing, set-apart young woman.

No matter how worthless or ugly you feel, He longs to shape you into His stunning princess. It starts with one simple step of obedience—one simple decision to answer the sacred call He has upon your life...no matter what the cost.