

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
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**One Gave Me Life, the Other I Married:
A Mother's Day Meditation
Proverbs 31:10-31**

Evangelical, Bible-believing Christians aren't very good at *both/and*. We rather tend to excel at *either/or*. A couple of illustrations will clarify what I mean.

Evangelicals, by definition, believe in *the deity of Jesus Christ*. We rightly insist that to deny that Jesus is God incarnate is the height of heresy. But in our zeal to defend the deity or divinity of Jesus and the truth that he is fully God, we often lose sight of the fact that *he is also fully human*. He is not either God or man, he is both. If we lose sight of this we not only do the Bible a disservice, we put our own salvation at risk.

Or consider another example. Evangelicals, by definition, believe in *the inspiration of Scripture*. We believe that this book was breathed out by God through the work of the Holy Spirit. That is why I believe this book is inerrant, that is to say, it is without error in the original manuscripts. But in our zeal to uphold the divine origin of Scripture we often fail to realize that the Spirit moved upon, in, and through human beings to record God's Word. These human beings lived in cultural and historical circumstances that governed how the Word of God came to be written down for us. So, much as is true with Jesus Christ, the Bible is also *both* divine *and* human.

My third illustration actually brings us directly to the passage we are looking at today. As evangelicals we at Bridgeway are *complementarians*. That's a big word with an important meaning. It means we believe that whereas men and women are both created in the image of God with equal value in his sight, God has called men to headship in both the family and the church. They are to lead and women are to follow.

Sadly, though, many men have *abused* this responsibility. They have distorted male headship into male domination. They appeal to the rightful authority God has given them to justify arrogant, destructive, self-serving authoritarianism. And in the process they fail to recognize the remarkable creativity and strength and wisdom of their wives, as well as that of other women.

If you are guilty of that sort of either/or thinking that emphasizes one biblical truth to the exclusion of another, you are in for a surprise this morning. For this passage in Proverbs 31, if it accomplishes nothing else, will forever shatter the notion in your head of women as weak, ineffective, overly-emotional, and intellectually inferior.

It's also important for you to know that *some men are actually afraid of Proverbs 31*. They don't like it. It threatens them. They are offended by what it says about women, and are fearful that if their wives hear the sort of sermon I'm about to preach it will put their authority in jeopardy and will lead to chaos in the home. Nothing could be farther from the truth. And just let me say right up front: ***only weak men are afraid of strong women.***

So much for my introduction on this Mother's Day. Let's turn our attention to this passage.

As we look at Proverbs 31, it's crucial to remember that this is a portrait of the *ideal* woman. No one reading this should think that this female actually exists as described. The author has pieced together a variety of characteristics and representative virtues to portray what a God-fearing woman might look like.

The author does not provide an exhaustive portrait: many other features of a godly woman could have been included but weren't. Furthermore, this description is not meant to tell us that every wife and mother must work or make money in the way she does. The point is that a godly woman will be diligent and industrious and resourceful and devoted to her husband and family. *So ladies, don't be discouraged by what you see here. No one could possibly live up to this standard.* God doesn't expect you to.

The description of this lady begins with a question: "An *excellent* wife, who can find?" Each time I read that it sounds like Yoda! Let's turn it around: "Who can find an excellent wife? She is far more precious than jewels" (v. 10).

"Excellent" is not the best word to render this Hebrew word. It was actually a military term in the OT and ought to be translated something like, "a woman of *valor*" or "*courage*" or "*strength*" or "*nobility*." One commentator refers to this woman as "*valiant*." That doesn't mean you should envision an ancient counterpart to our modern female body-builders! But neither should you think of her as weak or passive or excessively emotional. *She is delicate and feminine but far from helpless. She is assertive and strong but never arrogant. Never think that a wife's godly submission to her husband suggests that she is intellectually second-rate or emotionally weak.*

Is our author pessimistic? Is he saying that women of this sort are few and far between, a rare find both in the ancient world and in ours as well? Or does he simply mean to say that such a wife is as precious as rare jewels? Probably both are in view. Thus the man who finds this kind of wife is like one who obtains precious gems: they, and therefore, she are of infinite value. But such gems are valuable precisely because they are rare.

What's important to note is that *nothing can compare with her in terms of eternal worth:* neither rubies nor sapphires nor the most costly of diamonds can match her value. We read in Proverbs 19:14 that "house and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord." She truly is a gift of God!

Let me highlight several things about her.

(1) We read in vv. 11-12 that *she is an indescribable blessing to her husband.* He "trusts in her" (v. 11a). He has such complete confidence in her integrity and faithfulness that he entrusts his heart to her. He doesn't hesitate to make himself utterly vulnerable to her. His heart, which is to say his innermost personal interests, the very core of his being, is happily put in her hands. He holds nothing back. *He never lives in fear that she might betray him or take advantage of his trust.*

The word "gain" in v. 11b actually refers to "booty" or the "spoils" of war. Whoever wins a battle walks away with great profit. Thus she is portrayed as, in a sense, waging successful war on behalf of her family. They need never fear living in lack, because she won't stand for it. All her efforts are aimed at his good. He never experiences doubts about her intentions or worries that she might do something harmful to him or the family.

(2) *Her commitment to hard work and productivity* is described in vv. 13-24. She "seeks" wool and flax, the emphasis being placed on her self-motivation. The wife's submission to her husband ought never to rob her of *economic initiative!* She makes certain that there is always an ample supply of material necessary for whatever she is making. She is self-reliant and thus frees her husband so that he might devote himself to other matters.

In v. 14 *her entrepreneurial vision* is compared to that of merchant ships. The point may be that she does not depend upon sources close at hand for her supplies but goes in search of the highest quality food and resources, no matter how far she has to travel to obtain them.

According to v. 15, she gets up before the sun does to make sure the days duties are assigned and everybody is properly fed. The word “portions” may be rendered “prescribed tasks” and points to the fact that she sets the work of the household in motion at the beginning of each day and makes sure that everyone has their assigned tasks, each of which fits into a well coordinated plan. This lady won’t allow any slackers in her house!

She has a sharp eye for business opportunities. In v. 16 we see that she “considers” a field and buys it. She seeks out the best price, makes the purchase, and then plants a vineyard! This doesn’t mean that every woman today ought to go into real estate. The emphasis, rather, is on *the energy and skill with which she undertakes every task.*

The literal rendering of v. 17 is that “she girds her loins” for work. The point is that she rolls up her sleeves and gets to work. I don’t think our author wants us to envision a woman with bulging biceps. But she certainly does whatever it takes to make sure she has sufficient strength to fulfill her duties.

Verse 18 has been interpreted in one of two ways. Some say she determines that the time is ripe for a specific transaction, which leads her to burn the midnight oil to make the most of the opportunity while it lasts. Others interpret this verse in light of the ancient custom of keeping a lamp lit in the window of one’s home as a sign to all of a prosperous household.

The next two verses, 19 and 20, tell us that what motivates her to labor so selflessly is not greed but *love*. No time is wasted in idleness as she spends her days spinning and making garments not only for her own household but also for the poor in her community. She refuses to leave charitable works to the United Way or Compassion International or even the people of God, nor does she simply write a check to her favorite missionary. “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy” (v. 20). Among her other virtues, *she is obviously quite compassionate for those less well off than herself and also generous towards their needs!*

In vv. 21-22 we see again how she takes care of her family. The word “scarlet” in v. 21 points to the fact that she labors to provide her family with as high a quality of clothing as possible. This isn’t for fashion or extravagance, but is designed to keep them warm in winter.

According to v. 22, she is “decked out” in the finest linen and purple clothing. This doesn’t mean that all of you need to purchase your clothes at the most expensive stores in town. What it does mean is that inward sobriety and godliness of life do not preclude outward beauty. *External beauty is sinful and worthless only when it becomes a cover for sin or a substitute for purity of heart or the ground of one’s identity and confidence.*

We need to look closely at v. 23, for many have misunderstood what is being said. This verse is not saying that the husband lounges lazily at the city park playing dominoes and checkers with all the other unemployed bums in town, neglecting his family and living off the hard work of his wife!

To be “known in the gates” as one who “sits among the elders of the land” was a place of great honor and influence. The village “gates” was the place where business and critical commercial transactions were conducted. This was where important community decision making took place. This was the place where legal matters were adjudicated and government affairs were pursued. The “elders” of the community were the rulers and judges and the “gates” were the ancient equivalent to city hall or the county court house.

Thus we see that *her competence in running the household freed her husband to assume a position of leadership and influence in the community*. Notice that he is described as being “**known**” in the gates which suggests that his reputation is good at least in part because of who his wife is and what she does. He is respected and highly regarded among his peers, due in no small part to her efforts and faithfulness and diligence.

There is, of course, a *sad and destructive alternative* to this kind of wife. She is described in Proverbs 12:4 where read, “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones.” The point is that a godly wife enables a man to realize his potential in life; she brings honor to his name. But there is also the kind of woman who brings “shame” on her husband. She undermines his reputation in the community. One commentator put it quite graphically when he said: “To be saddled with such a woman is like enduring an infestation of maggots in the bones. It is an excruciating irritant and a fatal disease; it is an insidious, gnawing process of putrefaction” (McKane, 443).

I praise God that for nearly 40 years of marriage to Ann she has done nothing but honor me and support me. She has truly been a “crown” in my life!

After referring yet again in v. 24 to her economic achievements, the passage turns to a description of her personal godliness in vv. 25-27.

I especially love the second half of v. 25 – “she laughs at the time to come.” Nothing that Satan may threaten, nothing that difficult times may bring, nothing that people may do or fail to do can undermine her joyful confidence in God and her commitment to her family. Each time adversity comes her way or the future appears threatening, she looks upward and reminds herself that God is still on his throne.

Note especially in v. 26 that when she speaks and teaches and instructs there is a *beautiful combination or harmony* of common sense and wisdom, on the one hand, and tenderness and kindness on the other. Some people are good at giving advice, but they are mean and selfish. Others are kind and compassionate but haven’t got a lick of common sense. This woman displays a glorious balance of both.

V. 27 echoes what we’ve already seen: she is alert, energetic, and always has her finger on the pulse of her household such that nothing escapes her scrutiny and control. This is important, as *some may be inclined to think that anyone who is so successful and committed to the economic endeavors described earlier couldn’t possibly take care of her family. But she refuses to let anything lead to the neglect of her husband and children.*

The Response of her Family

And how should the family of such a lady respond to her? They declare her worth and her value to everyone! There are two elements here:

(1) Both husband and children call her “**blessed**” (v. 28a).

(2) Her husband in particular “**praises**” her (v. 28b). Men, how do you speak about your wife in the presence of others? Do you join in with other men when they make stupid and coarse jokes about their wives? Do you stand silently when they make chauvinistic comments about women in general? Do you keep silent or even make critical comments because you are afraid that if you say something positive about her that they will think you are less of a man? ***Shame on you if you fail to praise her publicly and privately!*** Take every opportunity to speak of her in the presence

of others as vv. 29 and 31 describe: “Hey guys, I’m sorry you feel that way about your wives. I’m sure glad they aren’t present to hear you say things like that. But I want you to know how blessed I am. I know a lot of women are pretty great and have accomplished much, but as far as I’m concerned no one can compare with my wife. She’s simply the best!”

Finally, *what accounts for a woman such as this?* Where does she get the energy that we’ve been reading about? Why is she regarded as valiant and excellent and of far greater worth than precious jewels? The answer is stated clearly in v. 30 –

“Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who *fears the Lord* is to be praised.”

This is not a denunciation or criticism of feminine beauty in and of itself. He’s simply saying that it is far from being the most important feature of a woman. She may not qualify to appear in the swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated or on the cover of Vogue, but that simply doesn’t matter. It simply isn’t relevant. *Beauty is wonderful, but it is no measure of a woman’s true nature; it has no bearing whatsoever on her value as a person.*

Here in v. 30 we finally get a glimpse into the reason for her wide-ranging virtues and the success of her endeavors: **she fears God!** It is her spiritual life, her love for God, the reverence with which she worships him, that accounts for why she is who she is and does what she does.

I want to speak for a moment to the young single men present today who are looking for a wife. Charm and physical beauty are not to be despised. But neither are they to be trusted! Look for a woman who has a zeal for God. Consider the case of Jonathan Edwards (d. 1758), who at the age of 18 met a young 12 year-old girl named Sarah Pierpont. He eventually married her and she bore him 11 children. Here is how he described her (remember: he was 18 when he wrote this of her; she was only 12):

“They say there is a young lady in New Haven who is beloved of that almighty Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on him — that she expects after a while to be received up where he is, to be raised up out of the world and caught up into heaven; being assured that he loves her too well to let her remain at a distance from him always. There she is to dwell with him, and to be ravished with his love and delight forever. Therefore, if you present all the world before her, with the richest of its treasures, she disregards it and cares not for it, and is unmindful of any pain or affliction. She has a strange sweetness in her mind, and singular purity in her affections; is most just and conscientious in all her actions; and you could not persuade her to do anything wrong or sinful, if you would give her all the world, lest she should offend this great Being. She is of a wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind; especially after those seasons in which this great God has manifested himself to her mind. She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, and to wander in the fields and on the mountains, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.”

Such is the woman who fears God. Such is the woman who is to be praised!

Someone today might be tempted to say: “Sam, you speak of this kind of woman in such a personal and intimate way. One would almost get the impression that you know her.” I do. She gave birth to me and raised me. And just when I was beginning to think she was one of a kind, I met another just like her. And I married that one!