

Text: Proverbs 31:10-31
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The Proverbs 31 woman.

A wife of noble character, who sews all her clothing and that of her family members, cooks and not just cooks, but makes food sourced from far off places, gardens and not only gardens but plants a vineyard, helps out those in need, keeps her husband proud as he is off with the other men at the city gate, manages some real estate on the side, and stays up later than everyone because she's so industrious and wakes up before the dawn to do it all over again.

This seems to be the Scriptural equivalent of Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*:

Women, you can do it all, it's just a simple matter of getting it done.
To the glory of God, of course.

We don't usually study or preach Proverbs 31 outside of women's conferences and devotionals or at the funeral of beloved grandmothers and mothers or on Mother's Day when it falls on a Sunday. Because Proverbs 31 is obviously for women. Not the whole church. And even then, it's not obviously for all women, but those women who have husbands and a few kids. And, often it's implied and often times explicitly stated that if you're a woman and you're not married with kids, well, then you had better get on that.

The Proverbs 31 woman.

This passage has been used by some theologians and pastors to teach and preach that women's place is only in the home - cooking, sewing, tending children, and supporting their working husbands by keeping the home fires going, just like the Proverbs 31 woman, a traditional, complementarian example for women to follow.

And this passage has been used by other theologians and pastors to teach and preach that women can and should work outside the home and lead in business and real estate and design and industry, just like the Proverbs 31 woman, a proto-feminist example for women to follow.

So, which is it? Who gets the Proverbs 31 woman right?

We're so eager to argue and lay claim to Proverbs 31 in our disagreements around gender roles that we easily misread and misuse and just generally miss the point of this passage and just what the Proverbs 31 woman is teaching us. All of us. Here at the end of the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 31 woman doesn't exist on her own. She is the capstone, the culmination of the Book of Proverbs and this poem about her forms a sort of bookend with the beginning of the book:

In Chapter One, we're told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and here we're shown a living portrait of one who fears the Lord.

Throughout the first nine chapters, the primary audience of young men are told to seek Woman Wisdom and make their home with her rather than Lady Folly, and here we're shown a portrait of a woman who, like Woman Wisdom, is worth far more than rubies and blesses the one who makes their home with her.

And in proverb after proverb, we're instructed to be faithful and not reckless, honest and not deceitful, industrious and not lazy, gracious and not greedy, hopeful rather than despairing, and here we're shown a portrait of a woman who has taken these lessons to heart and lives according to them.

The Proverbs 31 woman isn't here to make a point about gender roles and who keeps the house clean and who brings home the bacon.

The Proverbs 31 woman is here at the end of the Book of Proverbs as a portrait of what it looks like to take the teaching and purpose of Proverbs from Chapter One to heart:

to gain wisdom and understanding,
to receive instruction for doing what is right and just and fair,
to raise up the next generation with a good example,
to understand proverbs and parables and the saying and riddles of the wise,
and to fear the Lord.

The Proverbs 31 woman is a portrait of a wise and holy life. And an example for all those who fear the Lord and seek to live a life of wisdom. Everyone. Not just the women folk.

Maybe we get tripped up by the common translation of "a wife of noble character" and it would be understandable because translators try all sorts of ways of translating the Hebrew here:

a strong woman
a woman of worth
a warrior like woman
a valiant woman
woman of valour, as popularized by Rachel Held Evans

And "a wife of noble character" comes across as the weakest translation of what is otherwise a powerful description of this wise woman of strength. We've domesticated a term that is actually reserved, when applied to men, to describe the strength of warriors and leaders, and made it sound like a term for a dainty lady.

In verse 17, we read that "she sets about her work vigorously and her arms are strong for the tasks" in Hebrew is actually "she girds her loins with strength" which, in other places in Scripture, describes soldiers entering battle, leaders preparing for a difficult action. A description that does not match onto a dainty lady.

The Hebrew here is about strength, not brute strength, but strength of mind and body to get the work done well and right. Which is why I like translating the Hebrew here as “capable” rather than just strong.

Back in Exodus, when Moses needs help leading God’s people, he looks to a few capable men to lead and discern and judge the complexities of community life in the wilderness.

In 1 Chronicles, when David and Solomon are setting up the care of the tabernacle and temple, they recruit “capable men with the strength for the work” (1 Chron. 26:8) to be gatekeepers and protectors of the house of God.

In the same way, Proverbs 31 portrays a capable woman who possesses the strength of mind and body and heart for the work. To get the work done well and right. A life of wisdom requires work and discipline, strength of mind and body and heart, and the ability not only to know what should be done, but the strength and discipline and courage to actually get it done.

A capable woman with strength for the work who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.

One of the classic works of Volkswagen maintenance is a service manual written by John Muir in 1969 entitled *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*.¹ John was a free-lance writer who loved his Volkswagen. Loved any Volkswagen. Bug. Bus. 411 or 412. Safari. Squareback. Didn’t matter. John loved to tinker with them, fix them, drive them. And in contrast to most service manuals written nowadays by technical writers who work in offices at computers rather than in a mechanic garage with grease-stained overalls, John’s manual is conversational and delightful, humorous and knowledgeable. You’re in the garage with him. You can smell the carburetor fluid and oil. Hear the sound of the hood being unlatched and lifted. And you quickly learn how much he loves Volkswagens and how well he knows them inside and out.

John wasn’t an expert mechanic. And he didn’t care for Fords or Chevrolets. Just Volkswagens. But he did the work. He became capable and knowledgeable for the task at hand. Driven by love and a deep desire to know how best to care for the car he loved to drive. He tried and failed and persisted and had to undo work and redo work until he knew what was wrong with his Volkswagen Bug and how to make it right.

In John’s opening chapter he offers a few steps for how to walk through any of the procedures in the book. Most of the steps are obvious - reading through the whole procedure before starting, safety precautions, having the right tools needed for the job, reminder to keep tools clean as you go, and then the last step:

Step 7. Love. This is a tough one and will make or break you. You must do this work with love or you will fail. You don’t have to think, but you must love. This is one of the reasons I have nice tools. If I get hung up with maybe a busted knuckle or a busted stud, I feel my tools like art objects...until the rage subsides and sense and love return. Try it, it works.²

John became a capable mechanic, not because he was an expert, not because it came easy, but because love fuelled his work.

¹ Illustration from Matthew Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, p. 176.

² John Muir, *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive*, p. 7.

Keeping him returning even when he failed.

Keeping him from giving up when a stripped head or a dropped bolt down the engine made him want to tear his hair out and junk the whole the car.

Keeping him strong and focused for the work at hand.

Here at the end of Proverbs, we have one final picture of wisdom.

And it's not of King Solomon sitting in his temple writing witty sayings and lofty speeches.

It's not a picture of an expert.

The final picture of wisdom is a capable woman who embodies wisdom not because it was easy for her, but because love fuelled her work and her life.

Her arms are strong for the tasks.
She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue...
a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

The Proverbs 31 woman, this capable women of strength, lives her life in the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge not because it leaves us quivering in fear of stepping out of line and being punished, but because fear of the Lord is grounded in our love for God and God's love for us.

And that's a love that keeps us returning even when we've failed.

A love that keeps us from giving up when we're angry and frustrated and exhausted and seemingly have no strength left for the work at hand.

A love that keeps us holds us together and keeps us going when we just want to throw our hands up and walk away.

Starting next week, we're approaching Christmas through the season of Advent. And we'll hear the story again of how God so loved the world he sent his only Son, Jesus, our Emmanuel.

A son born to a capable carpenter named Joseph. Who taught his adopted son how to work with wood, how to use the tools of his trade, how to build something right and true, with wisdom and skill and grit.

And a son born to a capable woman named Mary. Who taught her son how God's love and promises give you the strength to do what is right even when it's hard, with wisdom and grace and persistence.

Jesus, who is our Wisdom, the Son of God, the adopted son of a skilled tradesmen, and the son of a capable woman worth more than rubies, shows us a renewed picture of wisdom, a fulfillment of the kind of faith and wisdom embodied by the Proverbs 31 woman, who blesses all those who make their home with him.

But also reveals to us the fullness of the love of God that keeps returning to us even when we've failed, returning to us even we'd rather throw up our hands and walk away, a love that grounds us in the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom.

A word and promise for all those who fear the Lord,
our capable Saviour, Jesus Christ, who has strength for the work
of saving us, loving us, and transforming us through the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.