



Wise Women

Behold Our God! – Read the Bible for Life Series #30

Proverbs 31

David Sunday

May 13, 2012

This is the last in a series of four sermons on wisdom from Proverbs and our focus is wisdom on womanhood. I know someone is thinking, “What business does a man have preaching on womanhood.” And you definitely have a point.

I’ve heard there’s a book entitled What Men Have Come to Know About Women. You open it up and every page is blank.

I’m not here to present my thoughts on womanhood. I’m here to present God's Word which is sufficient and always relevant and speaks to us with compelling wisdom here in Proverbs 31. In verses 10-12, we see the precious worth of a godly woman. Verses 13-27 highlight her ambitious work and then verses 28-31 speak of the praise that is due this godly woman.

Let’s stand together as we hear God's Word read to us—His life-giving, ever-living Word. Beginning at verse 10:

- ¹⁰ An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.*
- ¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.*
- ¹² She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.*
- ¹³ She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.*
- ¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant;
she brings her food from afar.*
- ¹⁵ She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.*
- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*
- ¹⁷ She dresses herself with strength
and makes her arms strong.*
- ¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.*
- ¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.*

- ²⁰ *She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.*
- ²¹ *She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.*
- ²² *She makes bed coverings for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.*
- ²³ *Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.*
- ²⁴ *She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.*
- ²⁵ *Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.*
- ²⁶ *She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*
- ²⁷ *She looks well to the ways of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.*
- ²⁸ *Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:*
- ²⁹ *“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”*
- ³⁰ *Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*
- ³¹ *Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.*

And all the women said? Amen! Praise God for His Word this morning.

Let's pray.

Lord, we pray that as we approach this particular passage of Your Word that You would teach us the things we do not know, fill us with what we lack and make us a people who reflect Your wisdom and Your image as it is especially on display in Jesus Christ, Your Son. Make us more like Him, we pray and use this Word to that end. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

What Proverbs 31 Is Not

First, we need to consider what Proverbs 31 is not.

First of all, it's not just for women. If you look at verse one of this chapter, you see these are the words of King Lemuel and they are an oracle that his mother taught him. So these are the words of a mother to her son and she's saying, "Son, this is what you need to be looking for in a woman."

So Proverbs 31 is for young men. As you think about what is most valuable in a woman—what you should esteem and look for—Proverbs 31 gives you a vision. A vision of the kind of woman that you would want to have as your wife.

It's also for husbands. This passage reminds us what we should be valuing, what we should be cultivating, what we should be encouraging and praising in our wives—what's most important.

These are words for fathers and grandfathers, to teach us the kind of character that we should be seeking to mold and shape in our daughters and granddaughters.

So it's not just for women.

Secondly, Proverbs 31 is not just for married women. This is a great passage for girls and young ladies. It's counter-cultural. Where the world is telling you this is what a woman should be like, God's Word is holding forth a more compelling vision for you. This is also a passage for women who are unmarried. All the character qualities that are admired and esteemed in this passage can be cultivated in full and beautiful ways in the lives of single women. You are engaged to Christ, your Husband, and have a family in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ where you can have spiritual sons and daughters. So you don't have to wait until you're married—if that be God's will—to begin cultivating the kind of beautiful character that is on display here in this proverb.

This is not just for women, not just for married women and **thirdly, Proverbs 31 is not designed to intimidate, overwhelm or discourage.**

I asked the most excellent wife I know—my wife Kate—what her feelings are when she thinks about Proverbs 31. She said, “To be honest, often it feels overwhelming to look at this proverb.”

The ESV Study Bible recognizes this in its comment. It says, “This lofty portrait of excellence sets such a high standard it can be depressing to godly women today until its purpose is understood.” So what is its purpose if it's not designed to intimidate, overwhelm or discourage?

The purpose of Proverbs 31 is to give us a vision. A vision that we can admire. A vision that will inspire us about the scope of what a godly woman's life can look like. It's about the scope of her life, not about expectations or demands. It's not meant to overwhelm us.

It's actually an acrostic poem. Each new verse starts with the next letter of the alphabet. Like this:

- A... is for how adorable and admirable and affectionate you are, my dear.
- B... is for your matchless beauty.
- C... is for your competent cooking.
- D... is for all the diapers you have dispatched as a mother.

- E... is for your elegance.
- F... is for your fortitude.
- G... is for your gentleness.

And so on and so forth through the alphabet from A to Z. The writer of this poem disciplines himself to think in a poetic way about the qualities that are most admirable in godly women. So we are to see this poem as full of goodness and inspiration, cultivating a vision of what God can make our lives into as we devote ourselves to Him.

So men, we should never use Proverbs 31 to judge our wives or to make demands upon our wives. We should always remember there are about 30 chapters written for us and only one with her in mind. So let's use Proverbs 31 to encourage, not to demand.

Women, receive this as an expression of God's goodness to you. Receive this as an expression of what God is doing in your life and will do in your life as you trust Him. It's not designed to intimate or overwhelm.

And **finally, Proverbs 31 is not possible apart from the gospel.** Apart from the active application of God's grace and the powerful working of God's Spirit in our lives. We cannot manage this kind of life, this kind of character in ourselves. We need the grace of God in us.

So that's what Proverbs 31 is *not*.

Now let's look at three aspects of what it says about the life of a wise and godly woman. First of all, we're going to look at the fountain of her life, then the focus of her life and the fullness of her life.

The Fountain of Her Life

The fountain of this woman's life is found in verse 30 near the end of the poem. This verse upholds all the other verses. It's like the foundation of the whole poem. You can't take this one out—this is not optional. The fountain is right here. *"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."* This is the fountain of the godly woman's life: She fears the Lord. This is what someone has called the rhythm that runs through the whole symphony. All the other virtues flow out of this fundamental reality of her life.

- Because she fears the Lord, she does her husband good.
- Because she fears the Lord, she works with willing hands.

- Because the fear of the Lord is what moves her, she is marked by integrity and industry and strength and so on and so forth.

All the virtues of this woman's life flow out of the fountain of her fear of the Lord. So what is the fear of the Lord? How would we define the fear of the Lord? A person who fears the Lord has his or her life centered on God. This person stands in awe of God's holiness, righteousness and justice. This person also stands in awe of what God has done for us in Christ so that His mercy and love and grace can be lavished on us. The person who fears the Lord is so in awe of these things that he or she says, "Oh, how I would tremble at the very thought of ever walking away from this God. Oh, how I long to be close to this God. Oh, how I dread displeasing Him and offending Him. And oh how I desire to live my life in a way that is pleasing to Him."

That's the fear of the Lord. A person who fears the Lord finds God's Word to be the weightiest, the most compelling authority in his life. So when my thoughts, attitudes, desires and agenda come into conflict with God's Word, I say, "It's my thoughts, my attitudes, my agenda that need to change because I want to please Him. I want to do what He desires." That is the fountain of her life.

Contrast that with the values of this world. In verse 30 we get two indications of the things the world values. Consider posters in the shopping malls or billboards along the highway. What do they promote about a woman being desirable and attractive? We would not see the fear of the Lord on those posters and billboards. What we'd see are things like charm and beauty.

Charm being the life of the party; having that winning personality; that winsome, cunny attitude and the ability to be popular. The Bible says that's deceitful. Behind that veneer—that winning smile—can be a very selfish heart.

Beauty—the world defines it in so many different ways but it's always saying to women, "You need to look a certain way. Your appearance needs to be like this in order to be truly a pleasing woman." God says that's vain. That's empty. That's fleeting. That's unattainable. You might get a hold of that for a while but it will fade. These are not the things that God says you are to aim for in your life. Instead, aim at fearing the Lord. Aim at honoring Him and you will be worthy of praise.

I think of my Nana Hazel who is 90 years old. On Easter Sunday evening, I was driving her back to her apartment and as soon as she got into the car, she said, "David, I just want to spend all my time with Jesus now." She tells me this every time she's with me.

“I want to spend as much time with Jesus as I can. The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is I take my washcloth, put it over my face and I say, ‘Lord, don’t let me do or say anything today that would displease You.’ I want to live my life in a way that is pleasing to Him.”

That’s beautiful because that’s what I have seen in her life consistently in the 41 years I’ve known her. That’s been the trajectory of her life. She fears the Lord. I tell you what, I think she’s pretty charming and beautiful in the process. She is worthy of praise.

So realize you cannot know who you are as a woman without knowing Who your Creator is. He’s the One Who made you. For Him you were created and you cannot know what life is all about, you cannot have any wisdom apart from having a right relationship with your Creator. “The fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...it’s the beginning of knowledge.” That’s how Proverbs begins and that’s how Proverbs ends.

So make sure, sons, when you look for a wife, that this is the primary thing you’re seeking. Look for a woman for whom the Word of God is weighty. Look for a woman whose life is molded and shaped by this Word. Find a woman who is more interested in pleasing Him than she is in attracting you.

Make sure, daughters, when you think of the kind of person you want to be, that you have God’s will as the number one priority of your lives. That’s non-negotiable. Make sure you are more afraid of offending God than you are of being unpopular. Make sure pursuing Him is more important to you than having a perfect appearance.

Husbands, value this, esteem this, cultivate this quality more than anything in your wives.

The cultivation of the fear of the Lord. Women of New Covenant Bible Church, let this be the fountain that feeds all the tributaries of your life. A woman *“who fears the Lord is to be praised.”*

The Focus of Her Life

If all the streams and tributaries of her life are fed by the fountain of the fear of the Lord, they are all likewise moving in the same direction. Just as water moves downward, so this woman’s life is constantly moving away from herself in humility and is being poured out in loving service toward others. That’s the picture—the composite picture—we get of this woman. She’s pouring her life out; she’s taking all that she has, all her gifts, all her blessings and saying, “I want to use this to serve my husband, to serve my household, to

serve my community, to serve the poor.” It’s not about her; it’s not about satisfying herself or finding herself. She knows her life is found in God and she uses her life to be a blessing to others.

I want to comment specifically on the blessing she is to her husband because this is a woman whose life is found in the context of marriage. Notice what it says in verses 10-12.

- *“An excellent wife who can find?”* Men, I hope you know that if you have a godly wife, this is a rare and precious gift. She is not an entitlement. You did not earn her. You do not deserve her. She is a gift from the Lord.
- *“She is far more precious than jewels.”* She is God’s gift to you and look at how she serves her husband....
- *“The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.”* This is a beautiful thing. This is a noble commitment.

Submission is not a bad word. Submission simply means that I take the mission of my life and put it under a greater mission. Like in our church, we have many different ministries but they all work together under this great mission:

*To bring glory to God
through spirit transformed lives
by the beauty and power
of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

My ministry here is not about me. It’s to serve and to submit to that mission statement. This woman takes all that she is, all that she has, all that she would desire to do with her life and says, “As a married woman, I want to use what God has given me to do good to my husband. I want the mission of my life to serve the mission of his life so that together we can bring glory to God with our lives.”

How beautiful. And notice the affect it has on her husband. He completely trusts her. He knows that she’s 125% for him. He never wonders what she’s saying behind his back. I have to say, this is the case with my wife. In all the years that we’ve been together, she’s always been loyal to me. I’ve never known Kate to say anything about me or do anything that would bring shame upon our family. I love having her at my side. I know that whatever she does and wherever she goes, she’s going to represent our family well. No

one's counsel means more to me than Kate's. No one's encouragement is more valuable to me than hers. She has invested her gifts, her time, her talents, her treasure, her encouragement fully in me. I've never once heard Kate say, "Boy David, I sure gave up a lot in order to be your wife." She's been glad to do this.

That's what this woman does. She enriches the life of her husband. He knows that when he gives her the credit card, he can trust what she's going to do with it and knows that she's not going to squander his earnings for her own selfish gain—"... *he will have no lack of gain*" (31:11).

"She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life" (31:12). Because of her moral support, *"Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land"* (31:23). He's respected in the community and the reason this verse praises the woman is it's because of her influence on his life that he's respected the way he is. He would not be the man that he is without the woman who is supporting and upholding him.

I wonder sometimes if people listen to my preaching simply because they look at Kate and think, "He can't be all that bad if she loves him. If she's behind him, he must be pretty good. I must listen to what he says." It's not because of me; it's because they see her and who she is in her support that leads them to believe in what God is doing in my life. I know she's enriched my life and has caused my life to be esteemed in so many ways because of who she is.

She serves her husband. She serves her household. She serves the community. Verse 20, *"She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy."* I'm going to skip over some of this but one thing I want to point at, just as a matter of wisdom, is that this woman puts her husband first, even above the children. She's devoted to doing him good all the days of her life. Not that the children don't matter; not that they're not important but this is not a home that is centered around the children. There's a bigger mission than that. If we put our children at the center—at the expense of our marriages—that feeds into the natural, sinful idolatry of a child's heart. So there's wisdom; there's health here.

This is something I always appreciated about my Mom. I have one brother—Eric. Sometimes we asked her—just for fun I think—"Mom, who do you love more? Dad or me?" She would always say, without a moment's thought, "Dad. I love your Dad. He's my husband; I'm committed to him." Now that doesn't mean she doesn't love us but she wanted us to understand that her first priority was to him.

So the overall focus of her life is in serving and pouring herself out for others. What a contrast to our culture that says it's all about you. Find yourself. Actualize yourself. Fulfill yourself.

I read about a woman named Edwina Curry who back in the 90's had an adulterous relationship with one of the former British Prime Ministers. Then she wrote an autobiography and told all. The press asked, "Do you regret any of this? Do you regret the shame and embarrassment this has caused? The harm this has done to the Prime Minister's wife?" She said no and I quote, "All the best things in my life have happened to me when I've done them for me."

That's what the culture says. "Do it for yourself. Find yourself. Please yourself." But God's Word says, "No, pour yourself out in service to others." This is a culture centered on Jesus Christ Who made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.

The Fullness of Her Life

Let's look at the fullness of her life. Just scan over this poem and notice all the different things this woman does. She cooks, cleans, sews and makes clothes for her household. She does those traditional housekeeping tasks but she does a lot of other things, too. As far as I can tell, she's got about three businesses going on the side:

- Verse 16: She's into real estate, "*She considers a field and buys it...*"
- Then she's into agriculture (same verse), "*...with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*"
- Then in verse 18, we find that she's a merchant—a profitable merchant.
- And in verse 24, she's got this linen garment business, "*She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.*"

The great understatement of the chapter is in verse 27 where it says she "*does not eat the bread of idleness.*" I never worried about that with this woman. Not a single verse of this chapter gives the appearance that she's lazy. She's a very disciplined woman. All this discipline—all this diligence—is flowing out of the fear of the Lord and into the good of her family. None of her activities outside the household—and there are many—they're all flowing back into the good of her family and the good of her community. Opening her hand to poor; reaching out to the needy (verse 20).

In all these things, she takes the gifts God has given her and cultivates them. She's very competent.

- She shows joy and eagerness— *"...works with willing hands"* (31:13).
- She's creative like a ship bringing her food from afar— *"She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar"* (31:14). There's variety, creativity and freshness in her meals. In her household, there's color and beauty and warmth.
- She's diligent in every verse.
- She's strong, not a wilting flower. Verse 17: *"She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong."*
- She's compassionate and elegant. Verse 22: *"...her clothing is fine linen and purple."*
- And verse 25, she's fearless. *"Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come."* This woman is full of the joy of the Lord. She trusts in the sovereignty of God. She lives her life unafraid because she knows to Whom she belongs and for what she's living.

As a result of this, her life is full of influence. Look at verse 28: *"Her children rise up and call her blessed..."* I doubt they do this every day. When she walks in the room, I doubt they all stand at attention and bow down before her. But I think this might be a good thing to do this afternoon for your mothers: Rise up. Bow down. Bless her. If you don't know what to thank her for, thank her for all the hours of sleep she's given up to care for you. Rising early in the morning before the light shines; staying up late at night while everyone else in bed to make sure you have food and clothing and your needs are met, helping you with your homework and projects. Always focused on serving you. Today would be a good day, when she walks in the room, to just rise up, all at once and say, "We bless you, Mom." Praise her and thank her.

Her husband does the same thing (31:28-29). *"...her husband also, and he praises her. 'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.'"*

I wrote that on Kate's Mother's Day card today—that's true. You surpass them all for me. She's an excellent woman.

C.S. Lewis pointed out that being able to praise and thank others is the sign of a healthy soul. It's the cranks and the misfits who seldom praise. They're the ones who are always criticizing, complaining, murmuring and grumbling. But if your soul is healthy you're able to delight in the things God delights in and God delights in this woman. He admires her. He holds her up for our admiration and says, "Husbands, praise your wives

like this. Encourage these qualities in her. Children, honor your mothers. Look at what God is doing in and through her and bless her.”

Of course as we come to the end of this very beautiful and memorable chapter, we might wonder who really measures up to this ideal. Truthfully, the answer is no one does. The most godly woman, the most wise woman, cannot really claim to have always been a Proverbs 31 woman.

No matter how godly you are, no man can ever say, “I deserve to have a Proverbs 31 wife. This is what I deserve; this is what I’ve earned.”

Proverbs 31 is not in our Bibles for us to feel good about our performance; for us to check off the list, “Look at what a good wife—what a good mom—I am”

It’s not here for us to criticize. It’s not license to say to our wives, “She had three businesses, what are you doing? Why don’t you measure up?” That’s not what it’s here for. It’s here to inspire. It’s here for us to admire. It’s here for us to delight in.

Josh Harris puts it like this: “We’re looking at the highlight reel of this woman’s life.” Let’s be realistic. Certainly this woman took some naps in her lifetime. Certainly there were times when she overslept. Times when she snapped at her kids. Times when she got angry with her husband. Believe me, if *“all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23), so did the Proverbs 31 woman.

This is the highlight reel of how God, by His grace, made her life beautiful, radiant, useful and refreshing. He made her a blessing to everyone who encountered her. If you are in Christ, you will have a highlight reel, too. For you are God’s *“workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that [you] should walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:19). At the end of your life, there will be a testimony to the beautiful things God has done in and through you as a new creation in Jesus and your life will be shown to have been a blessing to others.

Remember, your justification—your righteousness before God—is not based on your performance as a woman, as a wife or as a mother. God is not pleased because you’re a great mom or a devoted wife or a diligent servant. That’s not what God says makes you acceptable to Him. And God is not disappointed in you because you fall short of this ideal. God is pleased when you put your trust in Jesus. When you say, “I want to be dressed in His righteousness alone. I want to depend wholly on His grace. I want my life to reflect His character.” When you trust in Jesus you are accepted in the Beloved because of what He has done, not because of what you’ve done or failed to do.

One more thing we need to remember as we close this chapter and as we close Proverbs. Remember wisdom is a Person Whom we are seeking. Remember when God went looking for a bride for His Son to marry, He did not pick a Proverbs 31 woman for Jesus. God picked a broken bride. A bride who was covered in shame. A bride who was full of sin. Jesus said to the Father, “From heaven I will go down and seek her to be my holy bride. And with My own blood I will buy her and for her life I will die and then I will pour out My Spirit in her and will sanctify her and will make her a radiant bride without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.”

One day He’s going to come again and present His bride to Himself. And do you know what He’s going to say about His bride? Jesus is going to hold up His church and say, “An excellent wife I have found and she is worth more to me than jewels because I’ve purchased her with My blood.”

That gives us hope. Where we’ve failed, where we’ve made a mess of our families, where we’ve not feared God as we should, there is a Savior—there is a Redeemer—Who is able to transform us and change us into His likeness and He’s at work doing that today. So rejoice in Christ, mothers—you are complete in Him.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Text provided by sermontranscribers.net ♦ emily@sermontranscribers.net