

New Peace from Ancient Wisdom:
The Proverbial Woman
Proverbs 31:10-31

Have you ever wondered when Americans started celebrating Mother's Day? The practice has actually been around a long time. The ancient Greeks had a celebration honoring mothers every Spring. Then, in the Middle Ages, there was a custom called *Mothering Sunday*. Children who had left home to attend a trade school would be released from their apprenticeship one Sunday a year to attend church with their families. When they came home, they would offer their moms cakes and gifts. This was called at the time "going a-mothering."

Here in the US, the idea was first suggested by Julie Ward Howe, the author of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. But it took the initiative of Anna Jarvis, daughter of a Methodist pastor, to make the idea a reality.

Born in 1864 in Grafton, West Virginia, Anna Jarvis witnessed the aftermath of the Civil War through a child's eyes. Her mother, Anna Maria, had spent the war organizing women to nurse wounded soldiers from both the North and South, and generally attempting to hold her border-state community together. After the war, Anna Maria started "Mothers' Friendship Days" to reconcile families that had been divided by the conflict. She felt the scars of the Civil War could be healed by mothers – and by honoring mothers.

Throughout her life, Anna Maria modeled the ideals of Victorian motherhood. She gave up her dreams of college in order to tend to an older husband and four children. She bore the loss of seven other children with grace. She taught Sunday school in the local Methodist church for 20 years and stayed active in benevolent work.

Anna Maria's death in 1905 devastated her daughter. Two years later, Anna got the idea to found a holiday remembering her mother, and all mothers, whom she felt could never be thanked enough.

Mother's Day was first celebrated in 1908 in Grafton (where Anna grew up) and Philadelphia (where she lived as an adult). Later, in a resolution passed May 8, 1914, the U.S. Congress officially established the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.¹

Just as Anna Jarvis was impacted by her mother's life and established a tribute to mothers, so Proverbs 31:10-31 stands as a tribute to a woman, in this case, a wife and mother, of strong and wise character. The writer (possibly King Lemuel mentioned in verses 1-9 or even King Lemuel's mother) doesn't seem to have any one specific woman in mind, however. In Proverbs, the writers describe people generally rather than referring to specific individuals. We have here a description of the epitome of any woman who chooses to live her life according to the fear of the Lord.

While the author is *not* describing a specific person, he *is* describing the ideal. Obviously, this has a downside to it. Any woman who compares herself to the characteristics of this "proverbial woman" may feel very inadequate. And rightly so! No young woman (whether married or single)

can hope to achieve these character qualities before developing the maturity that comes from living according to the fear of the Lord for some years. On the other hand, any man who makes Proverbs 31 his checklist for whom he'll marry will probably be a bachelor the rest of his days!

What we do have here are the ABC's of wisdom. These verses are an acrostic poem where each of the twenty-two verses in the Hebrew Bible begins with the succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This approach made the reading of the passage more interesting and also helped in the memorization of the passage. This morning, however, we'll look at it from a more topical standpoint, exploring the qualities of this "excellent" woman, as well as taking a look at the man behind the woman.

QUALITIES

1. Godly

The first thing that stands out to me about this woman is found in verse 30.

³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last;
but a woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised.

The woman of Proverbs 31 is not necessarily *pretty*, but she is *godly*. What is godliness? It begins with a proper relationship with God. And a proper relationship with God begins with the Bible calls "fear of the Lord." I have multiple-choice quiz for you. The phrase the "fear of the Lord" means:

- Respect for God
- Awe at God's power and holiness
- Concern to please God
- Fear of God's judgment
- All of the above

The fear of the Lord means all of these. We'll be talking more about that next week as we study this central theme of the book of Proverbs. What we need to notice now, however, is that the fear of the Lord lies at the heart of all that characterizes this woman.

In fact, this book of Proverbs begins and ends on this theme. Proverbs 1:7 says, "Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline." And throughout the book we find illustrations taken from real life situations which demonstrate what wisdom and what foolishness look like. That is the purpose of the woman described in Proverbs 31. She is the epitome of someone who, in that culture and time period, lived according to the fear of the Lord. And this resulted in her being a godly woman.

This description is just the opposite of what our modern-day media presents as the "ideal woman," who is motivated more by what others think than by what God thinks. In referring to Miss America, Bert Parks used to say: "There she is, Miss America / There she is, your ideal..." Young, single, sexy, sophisticated, and – of course – most of all liberated!

Interviewed for the opening of her film *Catwoman*, actress Halle Barry, one of *People* magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People, says this about physical beauty:

Beauty? Let me tell you something, being thought of as "a beautiful woman" has spared me nothing in life, no heartache, no trouble...Beauty is essentially meaningless, and it is always transitory. I can't believe what people do to themselves [to make themselves look beautiful], the excess, and then they end up distorted. Worse, they still have that hole in their soul that led them to change themselves to begin with.ⁱⁱ

2. Virtuous

Being a godly woman, she is also a virtuous woman.

¹⁰ Who can find a virtuous and capable wife?
She is more precious than rubies.
²⁵ She is clothed with strength and dignity,
and she laughs without fear of the future.

The better known translation of verse 10 is "Who can find an *excellent* wife?" But the New Living Translation brings out well the two aspects of the one word in the original language: virtuous and capable.ⁱⁱⁱ

This woman is capable, characterized by initiative and intentionality. We'll talk more about that in a minute. But she is also virtuous in the moral sense of the term. She maintains her sexual purity. Her husband doesn't have to worry about her "sleeping around" with other men.

This woman stands in sharp contrast to the sexually loose woman called Dame Folly who's described in Proverbs as the "immoral woman," the "seductive woman," and the "promiscuous woman."^{iv} Apparently, King Lemuel had learned the importance of avoiding such woman from his mother: "O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows, do not waste your strength on women, on those who ruin kings" (Proverbs 31:2-3).

Whenever we talk about sexual unfaithfulness, we usually focus in on the men. But woman face the same kind of temptations, though maybe at times out of different motivations. I know that for my wife and I, the best antidote to marital unfaithfulness is marital fulfillment. There would be far fewer "desperate housewives" if woman were finding *from their husbands* the emotional and relational fulfillment their hearts crave.

3. Trustworthy

Because this woman is virtuous, she is also trustworthy.

¹¹ Her husband can trust her,
and she will greatly enrich his life.
¹² She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.

A little boy walks down the beach and sees a kind looking lady basking in the sun. He walks up and asks, “Are you a Christian?” “Yes,” she replies. “Do you read your Bible every day?” “Yes.” “Do you pray often?” Again she answered, “Yes.” With that he asks his final question, “Will you hold my quarter while I go swimming?” Every one is looking for someone they can trust, and particularly in a marriage relationship.

But what creates distrust in a marriage? The answer is – and I’ve seen it again and again – lack of communication. Distrust intrudes into a marriage when one of the partners grows suspicious of his or her spouse. One of the best ways to dispel suspicion and nurture trust is for partners in a marriage relationship to speak openly with each other about their struggles. But when this doesn’t happen, suspicion sets in and trust vanishes.

4. Hard working

Another characteristic of this proverbial woman is that she is hard working.

¹⁵ She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household

¹⁷ She is energetic and strong,
a hard worker.

¹⁸ She makes sure her dealings are profitable;
her lamp burns late into the night.

²⁷ She ... suffers nothing from laziness.

This woman is no sluggard, but wisely manages her time working for the benefit of others. No sitting around watching late afternoon soap operas. No, this active woman *brings, finds, gets up, plans, goes to, makes, extends, opens, dresses, watches, and speaks*. All of these activities speak of the strength of her character.

It’s obvious, too, that the role of this wise woman is in no way limited to the dishes and dirty diapers. Her activities and influence go far beyond the home. Remember the old expression “A woman’s place is in the home?” Well, it was never intended to put women in a Victorian straightjacket. That expression came about in the 19th century to free woman from slavish labor in the sweat shops, not to keep them using their god-given gifts to the fullest. This passage provides us with a liberating concept of both marriage and the role of the woman in contributing to her family *and* to society.

We must remember, however, that though this ideal woman expands her business ventures beyond the home, all of her efforts are focused on meeting the needs of her family rather than promoting her own career. Put in other terms, this woman is far more concerned with her *responsibilities* than her *rights*. And what are her responsibilities she works so hard fulfilling?

First, she provides for her family:

- ¹³ She finds wool and flax
and busily spins it.
¹⁴ She is like a merchant's ship,
bringing her food from afar.
¹⁵ She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household
and plan the day's work for her servant girls.

This woman has two criteria for all she purchases for her family: quality and economy. She takes the time necessary to get both. She doesn't allow personal convenience to take precedence over what is best for her family.

Closely related to this is *how* this woman provides for the material needs of her family.

- ¹⁶ She goes to inspect a field and buys it;
with her earnings she plants a vineyard.
¹⁸ She makes sure her dealings are profitable;
her lamp burns late into the night.
²¹ She has no fear of winter for her household,
for everyone has warm clothes.

Some joke about how some woman grab for their husband's wallet when pay-day comes around. This wise woman grabs for her husband's wallet. But it's not to take something out, but to put something in. In other words, this woman provides for the material needs of her family.

Again, the outside business dealings of verses 16 and 18 must be taken in the context of providing for the needs of her family. This woman's business endeavors and investments are *not* for the purpose of pursuing selfish desires.

Another way in which this woman works hard providing for her family is in instructing her children. Notice verse 26b: "she gives instruction with kindness." Regardless whether this passage was penned by King Lemuel or his mother, this is the emphasis of verse 1: "The sayings of King Lemuel...*which his mother taught him.*"

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "People are what their mothers make them." That was certainly the case with John and Charles Wesley, two of the greatest evangelists of the century. Susannah Wesley, mother of John Wesley spent one hour each day praying for her 17 children. In addition, she took each child aside for a full hour every week to discuss spiritual matters. No wonder two of her sons, Charles and John, were used of God to bring blessing to all of England and much of America.

5. Generous

While this woman is an industrious investor and amply provides for the needs of her family, it's not all about personal comfort and selfish satisfaction. With the wealth God provides through her own initiative and investments, she actively and generously cares for those in need.

²⁰ She extends a helping hand to the poor
and opens her arms to the needy.

6. Gracious

²⁶ When she speaks...she gives instructions with kindness.

But what gives the Proverbs 31 woman such strength of character? Interestingly, this woman, the so-called "weaker vessel," is made strong by wisdom.^v And that's the last characteristic that marks this woman.

7. Wise

²⁶ When she speaks, her words are wise,

¹⁶ She goes to inspect a field and buys it;
with her earnings she plants a vineyard.

¹⁸ She makes sure her dealings are profitable;
her lamp burns late into the night.

What is biblical wisdom? It is much more than knowledge. Vance Havner once said that many college professors are searching for wisdom while the janitors that clean their offices may have discovered it years ago.

Wisdom is skillful living that aligns with biblical teaching. All that we've see about the wise woman speaks of her moral goodness. But wisdom is the practical side of moral goodness.

I've asked whom I consider to be a very wise woman to share with us her insight on just where this wisdom comes from.

Testimony: Kathleen Parry

Pastor suggested, as preparation to share some thoughts with you, that I read Proverbs 31 several times. To tell the truth as I read it, I thought, I am not at all like this woman. I'm sure many of you have felt the same way.

For instance I'm not a night owl and don't particularly like to get up very early.

I've never bought any property and when my husband bought property a couple of times I signed my name to the deed with fear and trembling (wondering if we could fulfill the commitment).

And I never had to make special warm clothing for the family because we lived 35 years in Central America where it never snowed - none of us even needed a sweater.

BUT there is a verse that I could relate to – verse 30, “A woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.” (or as another translation says: “A woman who has a reverential trust in the Lord shall be praised.”) – blessed over and over again when I was concerned or troubled, God spoke to me through His Word when I put my trust in Him.

Way back when I was a teenager I met a young Christian soldier from Pennsylvania who gave me the impression that he was in love with me. But later I received a letter telling of a renewed interest in a former girlfriend. At first I was upset and thought of telling him so, but God spoke to me through 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “In every thing give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” This changed my whole attitude. So instead I wrote him what I considered a “final” letter, and included the verse, and was sure that door had closed, only to have him drive 2000 miles across the country to begin a courtship that ended in marriage.

Four years later my young husband, now a father of two, came home one day and asked me: how would you like to be a missionary? I was shocked and very hesitant in the beginning, because I didn't feel worthy of such a calling. But God spoke to me using 1 Thessalonians 2:4 where Paul said, “But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the Gospel even so we speak, not as pleasing men but God which trieth our hearts.” I tended to be a ‘person pleaser’ so it was so liberating to know that I only had to please God plus I was overwhelmed to think that He was going to trust me with the awesome Gospel message.

But one thing a missionary is called on to do is to speak at different places and that was really hard for me. Once when I was asked to speak at a large church I was so nervous and again God spoke to me as I read where David wrote in Psalm 34:4, “I sought the Lord and He heard me and delivered me from all my fears.” God calmed my heart at that moment and gave me the courage I needed.

The most difficult challenge I had in my life were the times I had to send our 4 children to boarding school for 7 months and I knew I would see them only once during that time. Then during high school days we saw them only during summer vacations as they studied in the States while we lived in Central America. I remember one day when I was alone in our bedroom crying my eyes out as I faced another round of ‘goodbyes’ to all 4 of them, God lovingly reminded me of Psalm 27:10 (a Parry translation), “when my father and mother have to leave me, then the Lord will take care of me” – my tears stopped flowing and a peace filled my heart as I thought, ‘there is no one else I'd rather have take care of my children than God Himself.’ And He so graciously did – all 4 of them and their spouses love the Lord.

And again when my husband died, 6 years ago, it was the Scriptures that gave me the assurance that God's timing was perfect and filled my heart with comfort.

So I'm very grateful that the Lord isn't always looking for great seamstresses or entrepreneurs, or even missionaries, though those are all needed – but He is looking for those who will trust Him. I wish I could say that I always trusted Him, but that would not be telling the truth, but I can testify that for almost 80 years, when I've trusted Him, I've experienced His faithfulness in me life.

By the way, I believe that Kathleen models a very important principle. Proverbs 31 is about the ideal wife, not necessarily the ideal woman. But when we look at Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7, we see that the single woman is as free to serve the Lord as the woman of Proverbs 31 is free to serve her husband and family. I believe that single woman can learn much from this chapter without feeling that they are second-class citizens in the Church.

THE MAN BEHIND THE WOMAN

The wife and husband have complimentary roles. This passage, as well as the entire book of Proverbs, is written to men. The woman's husband is mentioned either directly or by implication five times in the passage (31:10, 11...). In fact, one of the purposes of this passage is to help men be godly husbands who enable their wives to be all that God wants them to be.

So what characterizes the man behind the woman of wisdom?

1. Appreciates his wife

¹⁰ Who can find a virtuous and capable wife?
She is more precious than rubies.

I believe that one reason this extraordinary woman is so successful in what she does is because she has a husband who truly appreciates her for who she is. Her qualities are the result of her life lived in accordance with the fear of the Lord. But her faithful service in so many spheres of life are because her husband gave her the freedom to be all that God had fashioned her to be...and he appreciates her for it.

2. Trusts his wife

¹¹ Her husband can trust her,
and she will greatly enrich his life.

I don't think that the writer here is talking about trusting the moral purity of his wife, though he does. He's speaking rather of his confidence in his wife as a manager of the household and as a business woman. He doesn't think twice about entrusting the financial concerns of his family into his wife's hands.

If this passage teaches us anything, it's that we as men should be ready to entrust great responsibility to our wives. And if the principle holds true for the wife, I believe it does also in the church. We see this modeled again and again in the New Testament.

Who prompted Jesus to perform His first miracle? A Woman!
Who ministered to Christ during His public ministry? The women!
Who anointed the body of Jesus? Women did!
Who stayed with Jesus throughout his trial and crucifixion? The women!
Who were the first witnesses to the resurrected Savior? The women!
Who makes up the majority of the population of most churches today? The women!

3. Praises his wife

²⁸ Her children stand and bless her.
Her husband praises her:
²⁹ “There are many virtuous and capable women in the world,
but you surpass them all!”
³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last;
but a woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised.
³¹ Reward her for all she has done.
Let her deeds publicly declare her praise.

This man does what any husband should do who is serious about a vibrant and healthy marriage: he praises his wife. Men, if your relationship with your wife is less than desirable, let me give you a word of advice. Begin with daily praise. I’m sure there are areas where your mate doesn’t match up to the qualities listed here. But I’m sure there are some – or at least one – where she does. Praise your wife for what God has done. Then pray for your wife concerning what God yet needs to do. And most of all, be the godly man that your wife needs.

ⁱ Story drawn from Elesha Coffman, "Mom, We Salute You," Christian History Newsletter (5-10-2002) as found on www.preachingtoday.com and Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations and Quotes*, 578.

ⁱⁱ "Beauty's Beast," www.NewYorkPost.com (accessed 8-2-04); submitted by Bill White, Paramount, California to www.preachingtoday.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes the word is translated “noble:” Ruth 3:11 -- And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of *noble character*. Proverbs 12:4 – A wife of *noble character* is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.

^{iv} Prov 2:16-19; 5:3-20; 6:20-35; 7:5-27; 9:1-18; 14:1; 19:13; 25:24; 27:15

^v Allen P. Ross, “Woman: Choosing Wisdom.”