

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **The Proverbs 31 Woman: Is She for Real?**

SCRIPTURE: Proverbs 31

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Our Scripture text today is most often taught to women—at retreats, in Bible studies, and so forth. But it has valuable lessons for men as well. In fact, it was written down by a man who learned important truths about women from his own mother. The first verse of Proverbs 31 says, “The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him.” We don’t know who this King was nor when he lived. But we know that his mother was wise and had some excellent insights to share with him about how to be a wise and godly king (verses 1-9). But in verse 10 she apparently turns her thoughts to her son’s choice of a wife. Listen to the Word of the Lord as found in Proverbs 31:10-31:

*10 A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.*

*11 Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.*

*12 She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.*

*13 She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.*

*14 She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.*

*15 She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.*

*16 She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.*

*17 She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.*

*18 She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.*

*19 In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.*

*20 She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.*

*21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.*

*22 She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.*

*23 Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.*

*24 She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.*

*25 She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.*

*26 She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.*

*27 She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.*

*28 Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:*

*29 "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."*

*30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*

*31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.*

I chose this passage as the next biographical focus in our series on *The Ministry of the Market Place* for several reasons. First, all the biographies we have examined so far have been men—Joseph, Bezalel and Oholiab, Moses and Jethro, David and his three friends. Each of these has taught us something important about how to have an impact on our work world and for God at the same time, and the lessons apply to women as well as to men. But I thought it would be good to have a female example from the OT, especially one who was a homemaker, since that is the noble profession chosen by many of the women in this church. In a few weeks we will consider another woman, Priscilla, who partnered with her husband in both manufacturing and ministry.

In many respects the Proverbs 31 woman seemed ideal for the purpose of this series, which is to illustrate a theology of work through biblical personalities. This woman is of noble character, a godly woman, a wonderful wife, an amazing mother, an entrepreneur, an efficient homemaker, a fine cook, a seamstress, a real estate agent, a woman of wisdom, and that's just for starters. But as you can see from my title this morning, I have developed some hesitancy in setting her up as a paradigm example for all women. The fact is this woman tends to wear you out just reading about all she does. I want to encourage the women of our church, not discourage them. While I have known a few women in my life who approached this woman's accomplishments, I suspect most women here this morning are asking the question: *Is this gal for real?* Verse 10 indicates that even the author may be asking the same question: "Who can find such a woman?" Wonder women without flaws or weaknesses don't exist in real life.

I want to read a few paragraphs from a magazine article I clipped nearly 20 years ago that focuses on the dilemma the Proverbs 31 Woman presents to modern readers:

*Although this description is enough to supercharge any single man's soul, let's get real, shall we? Isn't this hopeless idealism one space-shuttle flight from reality? No one in his right mind believes such a person exists, does he? Isn't Proverbs 31 simply a paradigm of what a woman could do if she were able to exercise all her potential? To put it crudely, can't we regard the chapter as a poor joke, failing the test of real life? Is this just one more goad to pierce the soul of the already oppressed woman? Is this one more mirror for men to arrogantly hold up to reflect all the wrinkles of womanhood?*

*It is no secret that everyone has warts. None of us is perfect. Yet this chapter in the Bible is without a hint of failure. Doesn't she ever kill her vines by watering them too much? Doesn't she sew the sleeves on wrong when she makes her children's clothes? Doesn't she get mad at her husband? Do all her children rise up and bless her, answering "Yes, Mother"?*

*So, if reality is not like Proverbs 31, why is this chapter in the Bible? It makes women mad! It makes them even madder that there is no Proverbs 32. You know, the chapter that describes the qualities of a virtuous man—compassionate, firm, understanding, capable, gentle, authoritative, wise and disciplined.<sup>1</sup>*

Now I hope there aren't many women here today who are mad that I have chosen this text! If

there are, perhaps you will feel better when I tell you that I am not planning to do an exposition of this passage; instead I want to talk about how this passage of Scripture can help all of us reach our potential for impacting our world for Christ, including those who have chosen the noble career of homemaker.

When we ask of this woman, “Is she for real?”, we are probably asking whether the author had a specific woman in mind. I rather doubt it. After all, the epilogue of Proverbs is an acrostic poem, though that is not readily obvious in our English Bibles. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and these 22 verses start with those letters in sequence. That means that verse 1 starts with an aleph (A), verse 2 with a beth (B), verse 3 with a gimel (C), and so forth. The purpose of an acrostic is generally to be a memory aid, but what we must not overlook is that poetry often uses figures of speech and is not always a literal description.

But even if she is not a specific woman known by the author, I think she *is* a legitimate target for women to aim at. She is the Ideal Woman, perhaps in some sense the way Jesus is the Ideal Man. We don’t reject Jesus as our pattern just because we know we can’t measure up fully to His standards. So also I would suggest that the Ideal Woman should not be rejected just because she cannot be entirely imitated.

### **Keys to appreciating the Proverbs 31 Woman**

There are several important, uniquely Christian words I believe we need to grasp before we can appreciate fully the Ideal Woman of Proverbs 31—hope, grace, and love.

**Hope.** Christianity is a world-view based on hope. Fundamentally, we recognize the brokenness of our world and our lives, but we do not to despair; instead we look forward with hope to the day when the crooked and twisted things of this world will be straightened, when the wrongs will be righted, and when the Church will be perfected.

Unfortunately, that time is not yet, and we are often tempted to focus on the imperfections all around us. The harder we look at our spouses, the larger their flaws appear to us; and by peering too hard at the qualities of the Ideal Woman of Proverbs 31 (or, for that matter, at the ideal husband as described in Ephesians 5), we can become frustrated with the way things are, or, conversely, at the way they are *not* but should be. Perhaps even more importantly, the harder we look at ourselves, the larger our own flaws appear to us. Many of us know instinctively that we do not measure up to God’s ideal, but in addition we have to deal with society adding fuel to the fire with its own set of expectations.

Did you notice something that is entirely missing from the description of the Ideal Woman? There is no mention of her physical beauty, the very thing that our society and culture has turned into the Holy Grail. We’re not told whether she is gorgeous or ordinary, tall or short, thin or heavy, wrinkled, gray, or whatever. Our culture is screaming at women in a hundred ways that the answer to their need for self-esteem, fulfillment, and significance are found in anti-aging creams, exercise, plastic surgery, spas, diet, beautiful clothes, etc., but God’s Ideal Woman here in Proverbs 31 has no outward beauty requirements. It says in verse 25 that “Strength and dignity

are her clothing.”

I don't know what she looked like, but the author goes out of his way to tell us something that can hardly be over-stressed: “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (verse 30). Charm is deceptive because it's only skin deep. Outward beauty is fleeting because it simply cannot last, and there are no exceptions. But inner beauty doesn't fade. I can think of a dozen or more elderly ladies in this church—I'm talking about women in their 70's, 80's or even 90's—who are beautiful women. I won't name them because I don't want to embarrass them, but you know who they are. Under the wrinkles are sweet spirits, under the blue hair are gracious attitudes and godly hearts. One can see the beauty of Christ shine through them. That is what the Scripture wants women to aspire to. And it never goes out of date; it's effective at every age and in every culture.

I was talking about hope before I got sidetracked. The Bible always calls us to aspire to the Ideal. We have every reason to believe that although we are not yet the people God wants us to be, we can come closer and closer to that goal as we grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we must be content with our position in Christ and our station in life, we must not be content with our sin. We cannot give up hope that we can make significant progress toward being like Jesus, and for a woman, this means aspiring to the kinds of qualities that are found in the Ideal Woman of Proverbs 31.

**Grace.** But it requires more than just hope to become anything like the polished gem described by the author of Proverbs; it takes grace. We can't drum up enough effort or follow enough rules to approach God's Ideal, but His grace covers what we are not and makes us what we can become in Christ. You know, we are not just saved by grace; we also grow by grace, if we grow at all. It is ultimately the redemptive grace of God that sets people free, clothes them with dignity and strength, makes them hopeful about tomorrow, excited about life, and filled with joy.

**Love** is a third concept we must grasp if we are to appreciate the Ideal Woman of Proverbs 31. No woman is going to even approach the Ideal without unconditional love from the key people in her life—especially her parents and her spouse. Parents have the initial responsibility, and probably her father's love is even more important than her mother's. Women who do not feel loved by their fathers have a huge handicap as they head down the pathway toward maturity. (Please note that I said “women who do not *feel* loved by their fathers,” not “women who *are not* loved by their fathers.” Most fathers love their children, but not all of them show it well).

But even when a woman feels unconditionally loved by her parents, that is no guarantee that she will prosper and reach her full potential. The fact is that a husband who fails to show such love to them can undo all the good her parents did. It is not surprising that this woman's husband has full confidence in her and praises her. Of course, one can argue that his response is only natural because of how great she is, but I think it could as well be argued that she is as great as she is because of how her husband loves her.

It is no accident that the principal NT command to the husband is to love his wife. This is not a command to feel certain emotions, because emotions cannot be commanded. Rather it is a command to act a certain way. To love the woman in our life is to do what is best for her, to accept her where she is, yet also to help her see the potential of who she can become, to encourage her to fulfill her personal destiny, and to help her leave a mark on her world.

I stress these three—hope, grace, and love—because without these foundational perspectives, Proverbs 31 almost mocks women, but with these perspectives the Ideal Woman becomes an encouraging friend, beckoning women of all ages to run the race with her.

### **Discovering the essence of the Proverbs 31 Woman**

I think that rather than focus on the incredible accomplishments of this Ideal Woman (and in the process produce an inevitable sense of inadequacy in the many who don't measure up), I would like to suggest that the essence of the portrait painted by Lemuel may be this: women are not restricted by God to some narrow sphere of service, or to put it positively, women have almost unlimited potential to impact their world for Christ.

Let me say with all the strength I can muster that the permanent domestication of women is not God's plan but rather a product of fallen culture. Islam is not protecting women by hiding them behind burkas, refusing to let them drive, and keeping them out of the work place—rather it is oppressing women. Likewise even Christian fundamentalism is not protecting women when it assigns them extremely narrow roles. Women do not need to be protected in that manner; they need to be unleashed.

I don't know how anyone could read the Scriptures and see the host of women who made a major mark on their society—from Sarah to Miriam to Ruth, Deborah, Abigail, Esther, Mary, Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, and untold others—and think these were simply exceptions to the rule that “*men* are God's chosen gender for impacting the world and the market place.” Please understand that I'm not backing away from my consistent teaching that God has assigned ultimate responsibility for leadership to men in two spheres—in the home and in the church. But the description of the Proverbs 31 Woman should prove once and for all that God's delegation of authority to the husband and the elders (in the home and church) puts almost no limits on the enormous possibilities, formidable powers, and unlimited potential of women!

It is true, of course, that even in this chapter the Ideal Woman has important responsibilities to her husband and her children. To fulfill those responsibilities the married woman must put her husband before herself, but so must the married man put his wife first! And while the Proverbs 31 Woman seems to do it all, we are *not* told that she does it all at every stage of her life! We are *not* told that she is buying fields and planting vineyards while she has preschoolers at home, and I seriously doubt that she was!

Frankly, we must be cautious how we apply some of the things we read in this chapter. Those were vastly different times in which she lived. In ancient times, and actually up until the

Industrial Revolution, there wasn't much division between home and work. Many people worked on farms, with the field and the vineyard close to the house. Others worked in stores and lived in apartments above them. The production of food and clothing, the training of children, the making of everything required to live life took place in the context of a family business. The husband and the wife were usually both part of it, and so were the children. There was continuity between being at home and being at work.

I'm not trying to take anything away from the Proverbs 31 Woman, but today work has been separated from the home, often by great distance. Parents commute, children go off to school, and then their extracurricular activities take them away from the home several nights a week. I know some families that rarely have more than one or two meals together in a week. Thus people have inherently greater struggles with how to maintain togetherness and balance in their lives. I am encouraged that home schooling and home-based businesses have enabled some families to restore that togetherness, but I think we all have to do some very serious soul-searching regarding the extent to which we have allowed our culture to dictate our choices and fracture our families.

Now as I mentioned earlier I decided not to expound the text of Proverbs 31. While this is unusual for me, there are many books that have done this, and there is value in many of them. Instead I would like to suggest that each woman here can and should write her own proverb, translating this chapter into her own life in keeping with how God has made her. Given your gifts, interests, skills, location, marital status, and place in life, how would you like for such a proverb to be written about you? What would your ideal life look like? And what are you doing to make that happen?

### **Translating Proverbs 31 into your own life**

Sheila Graham has written perceptively,

*What about today's woman? Of what value can this ancient poem be to the diverse, complex life-styles of women today? To the married, to the single, to the young, to the old, to those working outside the home or inside the home, to those women with children or without children? It is more relevant than you might at first expect.*

*When we examine this ancient biblical ideal of womanhood, we do not find the stereotyped housewife occupied with dirty dishes and laundry, her daily life dictated by the demands of her husband and her children. Nor do we find a hardened, overly ambitious career woman who leaves her family to fend for itself.*

*What we find is a strong, dignified, multitalented, caring woman who is an individual in her own right.*

She then goes on to say,

*Not all people have the same skills. Some women's strengths are in music or art. Others may be in mathematics, teaching or business. Some are better managers and organizers than others. While some women may excel at coming up with ideas, others*

*may be more skilled at creating or producing what has been invented by someone else. No one excels at everything.*

I also like Sheila's observation that

*Some women work for several years after high school or college before marrying. Others, for one reason or another, do not marry at all. Does this mean that unmarried women cannot be Proverbs 31 women? No, definitely not. Although this chapter describes a married woman who is a mother, marriage and motherhood are not prerequisites for the successful Christian female's life. The essential characteristics of the Proverbs 31 woman can be applied to the single woman, too.<sup>ii</sup>*

What I do want to do is to pick out four key aspects of the Proverbs 31 Woman which can be translated into any age and into any time and suggest that these should probably be included in the personal proverb any woman writes for herself (or any man for himself, for that matter). These are what I would call "paradigm qualities," and I express them by means of questions:

**1. Do you value relationships?** The Ideal Woman enjoys intimacy with and trust from her husband. She clothes her children well, feeds them well, and knows them well. Still she doesn't focus all her attention on her own family. She has a heart for others—for those she works with, for those who may work for her, and for those who are poor and needy. Relationships are life.

**2. Are you using the mind God gave you?** We have a tendency to focus on what this woman does, which is amazing, even overwhelming, but I am more impressed with how she thinks. There are a number of references in this chapter to her thinking about the future, organizing, anticipating, seeing consequences and arranging for them ahead of time. It says she "considers" a field and then buys it. She's decisive but not impulsive. I see her looking at several fields—this field over here isn't so good (we can imagine her examining the vines and tasting the grapes), and the second one won't do either. But eventually, she finds the right one and buys it.

I can't help but think of my younger brother's wife when I read this particular characteristic of the Proverbs 31 Woman. One day she came home from a garage sale to tell David she had bought a house. For \$600! What do you mean, \$600? Yes, she said, it's a two-story house and all you have to do is move it because it's in the path of a new highway. (This is a true story, friends. I swear it!) My brother is quite laid back, fortunately, and he's also quite resourceful. So he spent the next few weeks cannibalizing the house—taking out dozens of six-panel solid-wood doors, old clawfoot tubs, leaded windows, etc., (all of which they put into the new home they were in the process of building for themselves). Then he turned around and sold what was left of the house to a demolition company for more than she paid for it!

No doubt a more relevant modern parallel to the Proverbs 31 Woman's shrewd real estate dealings would be the woman who is a bargain hunter, comparing prices so as to get the best bang for the family's buck. I know some women who are incredibly frugal and probably accomplish as much economically with coupon-ing as the Proverbs 31 Woman does with buying fields and planting vineyards.

Other evidence of this woman using the mind God gave her is that when winter comes she doesn't worry or panic, because she's already made provision for her family (verse 21). Furthermore, when she speaks she speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue (verse 26). Whether teaching her children or mentoring younger women or participating in the affairs of her community, this woman is intellectually curious and willing to make full use of the gifts God has given her.

**3. Do you have a positive, joyful outlook on life?** Verse 26 says, "She can laugh at the days to come," or as one translation puts it, "She smiles at the future." There is great pressure today for women, as well as for men and children (but for women in particular), to live up to some standard that they didn't have an opportunity to create or agree to. And even when they succeed in doing everything they're supposed to do, there can still be a sense of emptiness because they don't feel like they're in control of their own destiny; it's all being forced on them. It is exactly the opposite with this woman. She lives her life with a striking freedom. She's doing things for people. Nothing's being taken from her; she's giving herself away. She's confident that things will work out because she's done her best.

I can't tell you exactly how to develop such a perspective, but I think this woman undoubtedly believes in herself. Why? She knows God created her, gifted her, loves her, and provides for her. When a person has that confidence he or she can smile at the future.

**4. Do you fear the Lord?** I quote verse 30 again, "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised." What makes a woman most successful in life is this deep honor and respect for God that shows up all through the Proverbs. When the thought of displeasing the Lord is abhorrent to you, you have learned to fear him. But fear is not all negative; this woman's primary concern is God's will in her life. She is a woman after God's own heart.

**Conclusion:** The question of verse 10 keeps coming back: "Where do you find people like this?" The better question may be, "How do they come into being?" And the answer is that they are the work of God. As we are made right with Him through faith in His Son, He molds and makes us in the image of Christ. Do we really have any idea what impact Jesus had on the women of His day, and do we know that He can likewise have the same impact on women today? And on men, too? I close with this brief but powerful essay by Dorothy Sayers:

*Perhaps it is no wonder that women were the first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man. There has never been another like Him: a prophet and a teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized, who never made chauvinistic jokes about them, never treated them as either "the women, God help us," or "the ladies, God bless them," who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension, who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female, who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend, who took them as he found them and was completely*

*un-self-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole gospel that gets its pungency from female perversity. Nobody could guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything funny about a woman's nature.*

*They were . . . drawn to someone who, because of his love for them, conferred strength and dignity upon them and made them people of wisdom and kindness. These qualities come from Christ. It is ultimately the long, wonderful, saving work of Jesus to make us free to be joyful, creative, and excited about life.<sup>iii</sup>*

Friends, Jesus is able to do this for you, no matter who you are. He calls upon you to put your faith and trust in Him, to follow Him, to accept His forgiveness, and to experience His salvation.

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i. Unfortunately, the bibliographical information for this quote has been lost. I know neither the author nor the magazine.

ii. This article can be found at: <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/poet/prov31.htm>.

iii. Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human?*, 1971.