

Honour the women who honour the Lord * Proverbs 31
May 14, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Back when we were doing our 'Women and work' Bible study, we spent a lot of time talking about Proverbs 31 which meant that we spent a lot of time talking about 'the ideal woman.'

And I, being a little silly, said 'ha, ha, wouldn't that be funny if I preached on this text for Mother's Day' and all the women in the group said 'Yeah, go ahead, you just go ahead and try that.' (Don't worry, we have a very comfortable couch at our house).

But the more I thought about it and read and re-read it, the more I thought, 'yeah, we do need to talk about this' because our culture has all kinds of ideas about what makes 'an ideal woman.'

You've got the '1950s housewife' who keeps her husband happy and her household spotless, then you've got the Instagram woman who's always wearing the perfect sundress and straw hat and doesn't seem to do anything unless the lighting is just right, and then you've got the mommy bloggers who somehow find time to raise perfect children in a household ripped straight from the pages of Pinterest.

We have these competing ideas of what an ideal woman is but as Christians we need to ask: 'what is the ideal woman like, from God's point of view?' What kind of woman is the kind of woman that God delights in as His beloved daughter?

Proverbs 31 answers that question and so I'd like to explore it with you this morning. Join me in Proverbs 31 – it's at the very end of the Proverbs, after the Psalms but right before Ecclesiastes. Proverbs 31, starting in verse 10.

Before we get into the passage itself, I want to make two quick comments.

First, Proverbs 31 is very much an ideal. It's an idealized description of a woman for whom everything goes right and shouldn't be used to compare or critique women in the real world.ⁱ So, husbands, no going home and saying 'why don't you do that?' It *is* aspirational – if you're a lady, this is what you want to aim for – and if you're a young man, this is the kind of woman you want to marry – not a superficial trophy wife who looks good but does nothing – but at the end of the day, this is an *ideal*.

And second, I know that because this is a poem. Proverbs 31:10-31 is a poem, it's an acrostic. Remember what we did with the kids – one word for each letter in the alphabet describing a mother – that's this. Each of these statements corresponds to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet and it's meant to 'sing the praises of women from a-z.'ⁱⁱ It's not a comprehensive or logical unfolding of an idea so it kind of jumps around but I think that there are three main themes that really stand out:

The ideal woman in God's eyes is industrious. The ideal woman in God's eyes is generous. The ideal woman in God's eyes is fearless. Let me show you what I mean. So Proverbs 31:10, starting with the letter *aleph*:

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.

This is the introduction to our poem and it introduces the woman that this poem is about. And yes, it is 'woman' not just 'wife;' I think that they translate it 'wife' because of the husband references in 11 and 12 but this is ultimately about women, married or not. And what does it say?

A wife of noble character, who can find? If you're not using the NIV, what word does it use instead of 'noble'? An excellent wife (ESV)? Virtuous (KJV)? Capable (NLT)? Those are all good translations and together they form for us a pretty comprehensive picture – noble, virtuous, capable. But here's the thing: this passage has often been used to highlight the 'femininity' of women but this woman is not just nail polish and doilies. When you use that word to describe men, it gets translated as 'mighty and strong.' So like David in 1 Samuel 16:18 is called an 'ish hayil' – a mighty man. Proverbs 31 says an ideal woman is an 'isha hayil.'

An ideal woman is not known for her spotless counters; an ideal woman is known for her mighty character. An ideal woman is noble and capable and strong.

And guys, look at this – 'A wife of noble character, who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.' Driving down the 403 one day it struck me – "I have full confidence in Julie, I lack nothing of value because of her, she brings me good, not harm, all the days of her life" – that means that she is worth far more than the most precious treasure. More valuable than rubies, more valuable than diamonds. Am I treating her that way? As a partner to be treasured? That's what this calls us to. To love our wives as the treasures that they are.

So, we know what this woman is like; now let's talk about what she does. Verse 13 – we're going to see that the ideal woman in God's eyes is industrious. Look at verse 13:

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.

(Pro 31:13-18 NIV).

Conceptually I think verses 24 & 27 belong here too - 24 She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. (Pro 31:24 NIV). 27 She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. (Pro 31:27 NIV).

How would you describe a woman like that? Industrious right? Hardworking. Responsible. 'She gets up while it is still dark, she's the last one to go to bed at night, she sets about her work vigorously, her arms are strong for the task – that's literally 'her loins are girded with strength and her arms are strengthened' – that's warrior language again. This woman is working hard, making things happen, getting it done. She's not sitting around all day scrolling through TikTok or whatever – she's hard at work, taking care of her family and doing what needs to be done.

And notice, her work is not limited to the home. Verse 14, she is like merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. Verse 16, she considers a field and buys it, out of her earnings she plants a vineyard – she's out there in the world, transacting business, making her own financial decisions, looking for ways to benefit her family. This is an industrious woman.

Now, does this mean that the ideal woman needs to be working with her hands, making clothing and selling jewelry on Etsy while she raises children? She can if she wants, but remember that this is an agrarian society that this poem was written in. It uses the language of agriculture to describe the things a hard working woman does. If you're going to bring it into our world, it's not necessarily the agriculture part that you need to bring forward; it's the hardworking part. What counts is industry, hard work and commitment in whatever you're doing.

So that's characteristic one of 'an ideal woman' – an 'ideal woman' is industrious.

Number two - and it's related – an 'ideal woman' is generous.

Look at verses 19 and 20 – this is actually something that the Women and Work Bible study pointed out.

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 (Pro 31:19-20 NIV).

The Bible study book says that '...the Hebrew language ties [these verses] together grammatically, telling us that this woman spins and weaves so that she has the means to help the poor and needy.'ⁱⁱⁱ

It's a little hard to see that in the NIV so let me read it to you again from the Hebrew:

She **reaches out** her *hand* to the part that holds the fibres and with **her palm** takes hold of the spinny part; She opens **her palm** to the poor and **reaches out her hand** to the needy.

It's symmetrical parallelism – she reaches out her hand to making a living and then reaches out her hand to help those in need. She takes the proceeds of her labour and puts it to work helping others. She is a generous woman.

Your job might not be spinning and weaving, the principle of generosity remains. The 'ideal woman' is generous, not keeping all of her earnings for her own pleasure and benefit but reaching out to be a blessing to others. It's neat to read in the really old (like 1928) minutes of the UCW how the ladies would bring in money for the Ladies' Aid fund, money that they had made selling eggs or making quilts or whatever; I think you do something like that still – that's this principle at work.

According to Proverbs 31, the ideal woman uses her earnings to bless others – the 'ideal woman' is generous. And finally, third, the ideal woman is fearless.

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

(This is actually a call back to verse 13 – remember 'she selects wool and flax and works with eager hands' – the flax is for summer clothes and the wool is for winter).

22 She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. (By implication, the finest stuff).

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.

I thought about using the word 'forward-thinking' to describe this lady but let's be honest – she's fearless. She's not worried about whether the kids have the right snowsuits or not, she's knows that she'll be able to provide for them. She's not stressed about latest clothes and fashions – she's more concerned about dressing herself with strength and honour. She is confident in who she is and what she's doing so she can laugh at the days to come. I think of all my mom's canning down in the cellar and the washtubs full of carrots and potatoes covered in leaves to keep them cool.

The 'ideal woman' is fearless.

But here's the question – why? Why is she fearless? Why does she have confidence?

The answer to that is verse 30. 30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. (Pro 31:30 NIV).

Why is she fearless and not afraid? Because she fears the LORD. That is, she honours and respects and reveres Him. She lets Him call the shots in her life. She spends time with Him to

be shaped by Him. Verse 26, She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue – she grows to be more and more like Him every day.

The ‘ideal woman’ is not industrious and generous and fearless because she can do it all; the ‘ideal woman’ is fearless because she’s relying on the God who CAN do it all.

The ideal woman is industrious because she knows that God has a plan for her to prosper her and not to harm her.

The ideal woman is generous because she knows that God has been generous to her.

The ideal woman is fearless because she knows that God is absolutely committed to her.

And you know what? I see a lot of ideal women sitting here. You’re not superficial trophy wives living off the work of others; you’re rolling up your sleeves and getting it done. I’ve done a handful of funerals where this was the preaching text and it makes a ton of sense because you’re living it out. A lot of scholars will interpret the opening line of this poem like this: ‘A wife of noble character who can find?’ No one, because she doesn’t exist. But here’s the thing – we’ve got a church of them here. This is a church that is full of women who are industrious and generous and fearless because they love the Lord. And that’s exactly the way it should be. Lysa TerKeurst writes: Proverbs 31 is not a checklist of what you’re not; it’s a celebration of who you are.^{iv}

So now, here’s the thing. I get the impression that a lot of Mother’s day sermons on this passage have end here, and say “Ok ladies, be more like this.”

Frankly though, I don’t think that’s the main point of this passage. Look at verse 28 again – because she is industrious and generous and fearless,

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.

In other words, honour her for all she has done. Honour women who honour the Lord with their lives. THAT is the big idea that I want you to take home today. Honour the women who honour the Lord. Honour the women who are industrious and generous and fearless because they love the Lord with all their heart and soul and strength.

Our culture is obsessed with charm and beauty, youthfulness and hotness and yet what does this poem say? Charm is deceptive. Beauty is fleeting. A woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. A woman who fears the Lord OUGHT to be praised.

And actually, that's the only command in this whole poem. Did you notice that? Never once does the poem say – 'Ladies, be like this.' It implies it, it says 'make this your goal.' But the only command in the whole poem is verse 31:

Husbands, families, people generally - 31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate (Pro 31:31 NIV).

Honour the ladies who honour the Lord!

Now I was thinking about this – how to really and tangibly honour the honour for all the works you have done. It says 'let her works bring her praise at the city gates,' ie., praise her in public for all she has done. So here's what I want to do today. I've got these hands – and we're going to honour the women who honour the Lord. Everybody's going to do it – I want you to think of one woman – might be your mother or your wife or your sister or your neighbour – and I want you to write down one thing she does that you want to honour her for. You don't need to put their name on it; it's probably better if you don't. But I would love for us to be able to honour the women who honour the Lord publically and let 'the works of the Lord' praise them at the city gates.

BENEDICTION

May God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord show you his kindness and mercy and give you great peace of heart and mind (1 Timothy 1:2, *The Living Bible*).

ⁱ "The description is an ideal and should not be used as a standard by which to measure and critique women." Tremper Longman, *Proverbs (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament)*, 540.

ⁱⁱ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (Westminster Bible Companion)*, 151.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Women and Work IN THE Old Testament*, The Theology of Work Project, 72.

^{iv} <https://proverbs31.org/read/devotions/full-post/2019/04/25/but-im-nothing-like-the-proverbs-31-woman>