

Proverbs 31

Thanks for letting me share. It's Mother's Day. We were talking at our Worship Team about what we could do regarding Mother's Day, and I said "I wish someone would talk about Proverbs 31," and the Pastor said "ok – how about you?" which was somewhat cheating, I thought. I said "someone," not "me."

But I do love this passage, and I have loved it more as the years have gone by, so I said "yes."

What I would like to share is how this passage has inspired me over time - a woman who is not a mother and not a wife - and also what this passage says to us about the roles of mother and wife. We are a church made up of single and married, those with children, and those without, and those who live with situations that are less than perfect – with broken relationships and broken hearts. It's my intent to lift up the behavior and ideas that spring to life from this passage in Proverbs, and to help us want to acquire those behaviors and ideas, because they are a picture of Jesus who is our Savior.

But first, before we talk about the role of women and mothers, let's think about the church in society. The church is made of people, and people who are saved live in the kingdom of heaven but also in the world. And when we form an institution, there is CREEP and SEEP. That is, social ideas from the world about right and wrong, and roles, and what's important to do and to believe, leach in. Like groundwater in a basement. We've all had that basement. (Our church had that basement) Full of water, and no where to go with it.

The book of James talks about this kind of problem: he reminded the early church not to elevate the rich at the expense of the poor. Maybe in the ancient world, it was almost automatic to see the rich as better than the poor. We live in a time and place where that's not so true: our American ideals say that everyone is equal before God and in the eyes of the law, no matter what his or her economic status is. But the church of the first century lived in a world where very few people were protected by status or law. Paul's experience in the book of Acts shows us this – remember, he was arrested and flogged as a routine matter until he **said** he was a Roman citizen. The idea that everyone deserved equal treatment was pretty far in the future. So maybe in that world, the church had to be reminded that the poor and rich, slave and free, were equal in God's eyes. Maybe we, too, will have incorrect ideas about wives and women and mothers that will have seeped in from the world. So this passage in Proverbs may help us set our ideas straight.

And second, let's think about social roles as they are expressed by the church in time: sometimes the church has ideals from the world that they hold onto for a long time, and THEN because some of those older ideals don't match the realities of what goes on in our lives NOW, and we don't know how to make them match up, the people in the world think the Bible is outdated. No, WE may be outdated; the church may have outdated ideas because it reflects US, but the Bible is divinely inspired and it has guidance that will set us straight in our thinking and acting, if we allow it to do so.

The Bible beautifully and accurately reflects the time and place in which it was written. We will see that in this passage. But we claim a special status for the Bible in two ways: first, it is divinely inspired

by God, meaning it is essential to our spirits, relevant to our circumstances and right. Second, the Holy Spirit applies the divinely inspired word of God (essential, relevant, and right) to our lives divinely, now, to the situations in which we find ourselves and most particularly to problems we could not solve ourselves. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us get our thoughts right – which means out of the past, especially the imaginary past, and take note of the realities around us, and apply this passage to our lives now.

So where this passage corrects social ideas that are not godly, I'd like to point that out. And where this passage addresses our real lives, I'd like to point that out. And where this passage helps us understand a FEAR OF THE LORD, lived out, I'd like to show that, too.

I said that the Bible beautifully reflects the time and place of its writing. In terms of being something specific to time and place, this passage is an acrostic. There are 22 verses each starting with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Why do that? Besides the fun of doing it, if you are a poet, it's a memory device (mnemonic). It helps people remember what they heard, and it makes this passage a teaching tool. If you are a student, you should hear this, chant this, memorize it and remember it. In an age where not everyone learned to read and write, and in an age where memorization was very important, because books as a secondary memory were unavailable, or far too valuable for an ordinary person to have, an acrostic is a really good way to disseminate knowledge reliably. Who learns this, then? Did girls go to school? We know boys did. So at least, this is something that boys and men were supposed to learn about their future wives. This passage is a teaching tool, designed for the time and place it was written, and we can make a reasonably good inference that it is meant as much for men as it is women.

So let's take a closer look. What do verses 10-12 say?

¹⁰ ^[b] 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.

She is worth far more than rubies.

Well, what are rubies worth? We know that in ancient times, Jewish women - wives - were purchased with dowries, and that marriage could be very expensive. Men had to give the family of the bride a negotiated price. She was leaving her home, where she was a valuable worker, and going to the new home, where she would contribute her value there. So she had to be paid for. In that time, for the young learners of this poem, they all knew that if they hoped to get married, money and women were thought of together. But here, right up front, the economic value of a woman is acknowledged, and set aside. She's worth MORE than money. Why?

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

This brings back a memory of my grandfather, a thing he liked to say at holidays, when we were all gathered around. "My wife can have anything she wants." He meant, not that he could buy her anything she asked for, but rather that she would only ask for what was good for the both of them, and for the family. They both explained their relationship that way, and they did so for the education of the grandchildren. There was trust and respect that flowed both ways and it was indeed far more valuable than having money. It was truly sweet, and I am very thankful that I grew up with that kind of example in front of me.

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

I had a college bible study leader who read this passage and said "I haven't met my husband yet, but I want what I do now to make me a good partner for him." I liked that point of view. Not that her whole life was waiting for someone, but rather that she had a long view of herself as a project over time. It was the development of her character over time that made her a good partner.

This is a marriage that is not governed by false ideas about money, that relies on trust, and that is a life-long project. How about that? Anyone see any modern applications here? I guess that anyone does marriage counseling know that relationships founder on money, trust, and not being in it for the long haul project of bringing each other good for their whole lives.

Then, let's look at verses 13-27: here is an enormous range of economic activity, creativity and leadership. This is the section I find inspiration in pretty much daily. Have a look at HER verbs in this section (yes, I know. You've never learned what a verb is if you're under 35, and if you're over 35, you have bad memories of a third grade English teacher.) But go with it, for just a minute:

- 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 night;
she **provides** food for her family
and portions for her female servants.
- 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."

What do we see in this picture? If we hoped to find a picture of a tender sheltered plant, or a passive female waiting to be told what to do, we'd be really disappointed.

In fact, when I checked for some older online COMMENTARY on this section I laughed out loud at what I read. Here it is:

"The expression combines the ideas of moral goodness and bodily vigour and activity. It is useless to try to fix the character upon any particular person. The representation is that of an ideal woman - the perfect housewife, the chaste helpmate of her husband, upright, God-fearing, economical, wise." All right, no problem with that. But it continues "It is very remarkable to meet with such a delineation of woman in the East, where the female generally occupies a most degraded position, and is cut off from all sphere of activity and administration. To paint such a portrait needed inspiration of some sort."

<http://biblehub.com/proverbs/31-10.htm>

The commentator is saying that only GOD could give us the picture of active, knowledgeable and capable woman? OK. That's too bad.

Anyway, let's look closer.

First, this is a very knowledgeable person, not only running a household but also interacting with a wider world. Second, there is a whole lot of work done without resentment. Third, there is good management and leadership.

What does she do and know about? She is in textiles. She manages the whole production, from beginning to end: she selects and spins the wool and the flax; which means she either has or knows how to deal with raising and shearing of sheep and with harvesting flax fields. That spans a two very different kinds of knowledge, the knowledge of how to produce wool and linen. Most of us don't know very much about either one. Then, she moves beyond fields and animals to growing a vineyard, which requires a whole other set of skills. We know, from looking at the videos Pastor Rick showed us, a vineyard takes time to grow and to nurture. She earned the money that bought the field that her vineyard is growing in, so she knows what land is worth, and what she ought to pay. So those are four sets of knowledge, all of which take some time to develop – producing cloth from flax and wool, growing a vineyard and buying land.

It is an agricultural society we are looking at, and someone who lives comfortably in that world, but it's not an entirely place-bound world. She also is dealing with merchants, producing clothing that can be sold elsewhere. She has a sense of what sells, and who to sell to. And that is a fifth skill set, another kind of knowledge. In a few short verses, we see someone who has a lot of knowledge and skills earned over time, in complementary realms.

Where did she learn all these things? Possibly working within her family; possibly with her mother or father or grandparents; possibly with an older woman in the family. Maybe she learned to read and write and do numbers at home. We don't know that. But no one expected her to be useless, and in fact, she was supposed to know and be able to do a lot. Even our contemporary ideas could be challenged by the range of expectations here. Do you remember the talking Barbie doll that got Mattel in trouble a few years ago because one of her "set phrases" to say was "Math is hard?" Well, maybe we have something to learn from this picture. What would a doll from Proverbs 31 say? "What's that field worth to you?" "That wool needs to be cleaned again." "Let's learn how to sell!"

What do we see about her attitude toward work? Her arms are strong. She is like a merchant ship. What does that mean? She is full of valuable goods; she plans how to get from one place to another; she is capable of risk-taking; she gets where she needs to go, sometimes without a map.

She is up at all hours – that's emphasized. Her lamp does not go out. She gets up while it is still night. My favorite phrase is "she does not eat the bread of idleness." I use it in my office (occasionally - since we are all women and 1 man) and to myself, when I need to get up and keep going. If we are ever feeling sorry for ourselves as women, feeling tired and overworked, then this passage is for us. Staying up late and working hard is not exactly new. I would add that jealousy sometimes plays in: why isn't HE working as hard as I am? But this passage doesn't say – and that lazy man stayed in bed while I got up. Maybe he did. But it goes unremarked. Jealousy and resentment between men and women does sometimes revolve around perceived contributions of work. I'm not sure I have any solutions or advice to that kind of conflict. But I notice that this passage does say is that her husband is respected at the city gate. Maybe the question is: am I willing for my hard work to bring dignity and value to someone else besides myself? That's a kind of generosity that flows from love and also confidence in one's own value. The solutions to jealousy and "just me and mine" are maybe in here.

What about her leadership and wisdom? Leadership is, in its most practical sense, making decisions for others who trust you to do so. Making decision for others takes planning. She does that. She watches over the household. She is a planner because she can laugh at the days to come – she has stored up what she needs. She makes sure her family and her servant girls are taken care of. Let's pause on that. She has servants. Hmm! We typically don't, although I have traveled in quite a few places where it is common to have people living in the family who serve the family. It doesn't make me very comfortable. But I know there are a lot of places that do so. And if it were a custom in our society, what an opportunity to take advantage of people who cannot easily resist. What speaks most about you is how you treat the people who can't speak back. This is something I think about a lot in my workplace. She hasn't just planned for her family. She has enough and over for the poor and needy. I love that. This is the practice of charity which is not a random impulse, but rather thoughtful, made part of the overall plan for doing good.

Finally, she is clothed with strength and dignity. She speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction. These four qualities can't be spoken of too highly. This is a teacher, someone who inhabits the role not only by speaking with wisdom, but also in her being, in the strength and dignity she is "clothed" with. The people who know her best, her husband and children, know what her worth is, and say so openly. Think of it in reverse: we know that family life can be ruined by the lack of these qualities. But how often do we undercut "mom" by trivializing what she knows or does? We should not.

The last two verses say this:

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

³¹ Honor her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

I've said that this is a teaching poem that affirms the high value of a trustworthy woman, a woman who is worth more than any money could buy. It gives the picture of a knowledgeable woman, a woman who works, a leader, a planner, and a teacher. It corrects the notion that women ever had less to do or less to know. She stands in relationship to others, and she is not resentful that her good work gives honor and security to others in her family. This picture asks us to look at what we aspire to as women, and the way we relate to each other in families— and do better.

How is this a picture of the FEAR OF THE LORD? Every good act is a reflection of the good God who enabled you to do it. Every decision to trust and be trustworthy; every application of hardworking intelligence to the production of excellent goods; every expression of kindness and patience; every plan for charity; every wise word in season – these all flow from a fear of the Lord.