

Sermon 100, Fleshing It Out, Proverbs 31:10-31

Proposition: The Proverbs 31 woman is an example for us of everyday life wisely lived — in other words, of a wise daughter formed according to the teaching contained in the Proverbs of Solomon.

- I. The Valiant Wife's Value, vv. 10-12⁵
 - A. Her Scarcity, v. 10
 - B. Her Worth to Her Husband, vv. 11-12
- II. The Valiant Wife's Activities, vv. 13-27
 - A. Her Cottage Industry, vv. 13-19
 - B. Her Social Achievements, vv. 20-27
- III. The Valiant Wife's Praise, vv. 28-31
 - A. By Her Family, vv. 28-29
 - B. By Everyone, vv. 30-31

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, together we will consider this evening the closing words of Proverbs. The woman described in this passage, the Proverbs 31 woman, is how King Lemuel and his mother sum up the teaching of the previous 30 chapters of wisdom instruction. Given all these proverbs, what does a wise life look like? We have the gospels, of course. They tell us how the Wise Son actually lived during His years on earth. But He was a special man with a special mission, a calling that none of us exactly share. What does a life of wisdom look like under normal circumstances? And rather than showing us the wise son living such a life, the sage shows us instead a wise daughter, one who excels other daughters through the wisdom with which she lives her life. If you pay attention to these proverbs of Solomon, what will you turn into? If you meet personified wisdom and internalize His teaching, what will you look like? You will look like the Proverbs 31 woman, who is a picture of valiant womanhood, of wisdom lived out, and of the bride of Christ whom He will wed as His reward and hers for living wisely. We will not look in detail at how this picture should be applied to the church, though the symbolic correspondence is undoubtedly there. Instead, we will confine ourselves to talking about how valuable a wise woman is, what she does, and how she is praised by those who know her best. As we do this, we will see what someone fully formed by the teaching of wisdom looks like — and we will learn to love wisdom even more.

I. The Valiant Wife's Value, vv. 10-12

We begin, then, by looking at who this woman is. First of all, how should her epithet be translated? The NASB calls her “an excellent wife,” while NIV calls her “a wife of noble

⁵ This outline is adapted from Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, in loc.*

character” and other versions range from “capable” to “virtuous” to “worthy” and even “good.” What is this woman? I believe that the best rendering is “valiant,” because this term is used of warriors in other parts of the Bible. We see other martial language applied to the Proverbs 31 woman too: She tears meat like a lioness, and her husband has no lack of booty thanks to her prowess. And so the translation that emphasizes the warlike dimensions of this term is the one we ought to prefer. Whoever said domesticity was boring and that SEAL Team 6 is where the action is at disagrees with King Lemuel and his mother.

So we have a valiant woman. Indeed, we have a valiant wife — for that is how the term should be translated. The whole rest of the description takes for granted that she is married, and explicitly mentions her husband more than once.

We saw at the beginning of Proverbs that Lady Wisdom is unmarried and childless, so far as her description in Proverbs is concerned. She is a homemaker, but to be a homemaker it is not necessary to be married. Anyway, Lady Wisdom is single, but the valiant wife is married. What’s the significance here?

It takes courage to be a wife! That’s the significance. You want to find someone with the heart of a lion and the guts of a warrior? Then just peek over the fence into the backyard of your next-door neighbor and take a good look at the housewife who’s back there. She has courage. She is valiant, like Uriah the Hittite and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada. And not only is she valiant.

A. Her Scarcity, v. 10

She is also rare. Who can find such a woman? It is not an easy task. Solomon, who found plenty of ladies he considered wife material, said he had found one man in a thousand, “but a woman among all these I have not found.” That’s how scarce this woman is. That’s how valuable she is. You think that precious stones are rare and beautiful and therefore valuable? Well, a valiant wife is far more rare than that. I thank God that I only needed to find one wife, because I don’t think I could have found a second one. The one I have is irreplaceable.

The valiant wife is worth a lot just by virtue of how scarce she is.

B. Her Worth to Her Husband, vv. 11-12

Beyond that, though, her worth is further signaled by her value to her husband. His heart trusts her. Of how much value is this quality in a relationship? Well, in a relationship where you share everything down to the last dime, plus the most sensitive and tender bits of your anatomy, you cannot price trust too highly. Why is the valiant wife so trustworthy? Because she is a god-fearing, wise woman. And the husband who thus hands his whole soul over to her has no lack of booty. He doesn’t have a need to go off to war to supplement the household income. Oh no. There is no pressure on him to get his act together and bring home more bacon, no matter the size of the personal risk. He doesn’t need a bonus or a salary increase, because his wife is so courageous. She does him good and not evil.

Can we say this about the church toward Christ? Do we do good and not evil for our Lord? What about in our daily lives toward our Savior? Do you individually do Him good and

not evil? How about in your calling as a spouse? Do you do your husband here on earth good and not evil every day?

Remember, brothers and sisters, we are looking at the portrait of a woman profoundly shaped by the teaching of Solomon's proverbs. She does all this good because she has been transformed by the fear of God.

If your husband doesn't trust you, if there is reason to believe that you have done him a significant amount of harm during your life, that is prima facie evidence that you have not been formed by the Proverbs as you ought to be. Men, the same goes for you. If your wife has been harmed by you, if you know she doesn't trust you, then you can also know that you don't live out the wisdom of Proverbs.

If you haven't lived up to what you know about fearing God, repent! And then turn back toward Him and seek His forgiveness. Set yourself to study these Proverbs and put their wisdom into practice.

II. The Valiant Wife's Activities, vv. 13-27

After all, that's what the valiant wife does. Proverbs has spoken repeatedly against laziness and in favor of hard work. Here we have the valiant wife's hard work described.

A. Her Cottage Industry, vv. 13-19

What does this woman do at home? She works her tail off. The first thing that's mentioned is that she seeks out raw material for clothing. For most of human history, clothing was one of the most expensive things you could buy. If you've ever tried to make cloth on your own, particularly without any kind of power tools, you will know why. Even today, with an electric sewing machine and electric scissors, it can take hours to make a single piece of clothing by hand. If you just imagine paying someone for 40 hours of skilled labor to make the clothing you're wearing right now, that would be about right. How much money do you make in a week? Would you be willing to pay that much money for a single complete set of clothing? I highly doubt it. Most of us think that clothes should cost an hour's wages, not a week's. But in those days, clothing all had to be made by hand, from cutting the flax or shearing the sheep, all the way through finishing the seams. Yet this searching for raw materials for clothing is merely the first step in the valiant wife's hard work at home.

You see, in addition to clothing she also provides food for her household. She is compared to merchant shipping, not in respect of her bulk or tonnage, but in respect of the distance covered. She brings food from far away. Today, we take such a thing for granted. Of course I eat Australian lamb prepared with Chinese ginger and Thai coconut milk on top of Californian rice with Italian soda to drink and Belgian chocolate for dessert. That sounds quite normal to all of us. Well, in the ancient world, before air travel and huge container ships, it wasn't normal at all. "Locally grown" was not a rare and expensive thing in those days; it was all you could get. If it wasn't locally grown, it wasn't eaten. But this woman works hard and brings food in from all over.

And she doesn't sleep in. She gets up before dawn and gives instructions to her maidservants. She has a full domestic staff, and she manages them thoughtfully — a task which is far from the smallest of her feats. She starts preparing the meals early in the morning.

Wisdom works hard. We know that from the book of Proverbs. But here we see it enfleshed. We have a woman who cares for her household's food, clothing, and domestic staff. That in itself is plenty of work. But we are just getting started. This woman also engages in real estate deals and land development. From her earnings she plants a vineyard. Again, this is a lot of work, but as we know, it is some of the most remunerative work out there. A land developer is our president right now, and he claims to be very rich because of the money he's made on real estate and development deals.

The God-fearing woman, in other words, is a homemaker, but she does things far beyond what we might think that terms means. Her concern is with the whole household and its long-term prosperity, not just whether her kids and staff have food and clothing today.

She is clothed with strength. This is a strong woman, not a weak one. The wise son is not weak, and neither is the wise daughter. Wisdom does not lie in being wimpy! Rather, the righteous are bold as a lion.

B. Her Social Achievements, vv. 20-27

The text returns to the theme of her sewing clothing, with particular focus on her hands as the tool of tools. We first see her hands working, and then in the next verse we see them stretched out to the poor. Coincidence? Of course not! We have seen over and over that the wise son is concerned for the poor. Well, the best way to care for the poor is to work hard and generate wealth. That work, in turn, benefits the poor not just indirectly but also directly when out of a generous and honest heart you offer some of the fruits of your labor to them. We are not told exactly how the valiant woman helps the poor. But it is clear that she gives them a hand. Again, the Bible does not say "This is the way thou shalt help the poor." It is lean on policy prescriptions but long on policy priorities. You and I need to have those same priorities in our own lives. Could it plausibly be said of you that you give a hand to the poor?

Again the theme returns to clothing, this time focusing on the external glory of her and her household's clothing. The valiant woman who is a wise daughter dresses beautifully. Do you? Do your clothes look good, or bad? This is a serious question. The text goes out of its way to tell us that God-fearing people dress up. Scarlet, fine linen, purple — these are the things she wears.

I've had people tell me that it is pretentious to dress up. And I have spent a good part of my life in ugly, ill-fitting clothes. But that is not wisdom. If we are serious about reading the Proverbs 31 woman as a real-life example of how someone who follows Proverbs will live, then we need to dress up. I'm not talking about wearing a tuxedo to Walmart. I'm talking about dressing on the upper end of what is appropriate for your age and station. If you are a judge, you need to dress better than a janitor. But in every calling, there is a range of clothing — and the wise son and daughter dress on the upper end of that range, not at the bottom end of it.

Her social achievements are not limited to caring for the poor and dressing well, though. She also makes her husband prominent. He is respected in the gates, where the legal and social business of the city was done. The elders of the land welcome him as one of their own. To translate that term into Latin, we would say that he is known among the Senators. The old men who have the final say in directing the community welcome this woman's husband.

Ladies, do you comport yourself in the kind of way that will lead to community recognition for your husband? Is that something that's even on your radar screen? It was on the Proverbs 31 woman's radar. Clearly, it's not the first or the most important thing the text talks about. But like dressing up, it is just as clearly present on the page. Wives, you need to live in a way that allows your husband to be dignified and respected. Getting on Facebook to complain about him does not accomplish that goal. Calling your mom to fuss about what a louse he is does not accomplish that goal. Telling him that he is a wimp and making clear that whatever he might think of his manhood, you think it's overrated is not a way to accomplish the goal. Her husband sits among the elders of the land. If you fear God, you will live in a way that would allow your husband to do that too. (Hint: Telling your husband that he oughta be sitting among the elders of the land by now is never going to help him get there.)

Well, in addition to doing household work and developing land, the Proverbs 31 woman is also engaged in manufacturing. She branches out from skills she uses for her household, the chief of which is making clothing, and actually produces extra clothes for sale. In other words, does the Bible teach that women should not work outside the home? Not necessarily. It certainly says that the focus of their strength needs to be their home. But part of working for the household can certainly be things like real estate development and manufacturing. The Proverbs 31 woman uses her core skills from household management and monetizes them for the benefit of the whole household.

How is that possible? Through her strength of character. She is strong and dignified, and the future does not worry her because she knows that Yahweh will direct her paths. She speaks with wisdom, and the torah of kindness is on her tongue. Did you hear that? Wisdom and kindness live together on the tongue of a God-fearing, Proverbs-shaped woman. If they don't live together on your tongue, that tells you something about how far you have yet to travel. And it also tells you about the joy of serving Christ, for wisdom and kindness live together on His tongue.

If you have to sum up the activity of the Proverbs 31 woman, you cannot do better than to cite v. 27: The Proverbs 31 woman is primarily concerned with her household, and she works hard all day long. I believe that the same could be said of the wise son, though the primary care for the household that he exercises looks not so much to its daily functioning as to the training of its members. Thus, we see the father constantly teaching his son through the book. That is a father's concern with his household — not so directly making the clothing or food.

Do you look well to your household? How about chowing down on the bread of idleness? It would seem that the lesson of caring for your household is one of the most important ones in the book, after the lesson of fearing God.

III. The Valiant Wife's Praise, vv. 28-31

When you live in the way that Proverbs teaches, you will get compliments.

A. By Her Family, vv. 28-29

Her family are the first to praise her. Do you get told regularly that you're doing a good job? Do the people under your care appear to like it? Do they not only thank you for your work, but express to you that they would rather have you in the position than anyone else? If you live the way Proverbs says, you will get that praise. This woman's husband is not afraid to call her more valiant than all other daughters. She is exceptional. That is the reward and fruit of mature wisdom: Those closest to you recognize how exceptional your lifestyle actually is.

B. By Everyone, vv. 30-31

But it's not just the family that sees it. The whole world bears witness to this woman's value. You can get compliments on your good looks for a while. But charm and beauty don't last forever; the fear of God does. The best reward you can give this woman is to let her enjoy the fruit of her labors. What she's done is publicly seen and publicly appreciated.

So that's the Proverbs 31 woman. Is it you? Are you going to cry out and dig for wisdom by listening to the words of this book? Are you dedicated to fearing God for the rest of your life, and growing proportionally in wisdom? As your pastor, it's my job to prepare you as the bride of Christ to be like this woman. As a husband, it's my job to treat my wife wisely and speak lovingly to her so that she will be like this. And this is what Christ was talking about when He promised to build His church.

Do you think a church full of church ladies like this would be mighty in the land? Do you think it could conquer Hell? I think so; Jesus does too. So fear God, learn the knowledge of the Holy One, and you will be an excellent bride, a wife for the Lamb. Amen.