

## Wisdom for Life: Admire this Woman of Wisdom

Proverbs 31:10-31

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 31, 2020

### Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're bringing to a conclusion our series in the book of Proverbs. We've been studying this book of wisdom, seeking practical wisdom, wisdom for life. **That's what we've been talking about – how to grow biblically wise and not just biblically smart.**
  - Biblically smart individuals know a whole lot about the Bible. They can quote it back to you. They can explain it and teach it to you. **And if you're faced with a clear cut decision between right and wrong – between what the Bible says is obedience versus disobedience – then biblical smarts is sufficient to point you in the obvious direction.**
  
- ❖ **But the reality is – most of the decisions you'll face in life (especially the hard ones) are not clear cut and spelled out for you in Scripture.** They're usually not decisions between right or wrong; good or bad – but between good, better, and best. And in those situations, biblical smarts won't help. What you need is biblical wisdom.
  - **Wisdom helps you to take the teaching of Scripture and apply it to the everyday experiences that are often confusing and morally fuzzy or maybe morally neutral.** How do you handle those situations? That's the kind of wisdom that Proverbs offers – wisdom for life.
  
- ❖ Now back in Proverbs 1, it said that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. **In other words, the truly wise are those who have a baseline respect for God and his sovereign wisdom.** The wise are the ones who humble themselves. They don't stand in judgment over God's word or God's will. They submit to his word and trust in his will.
  - Well, just as the book of Proverbs began with an emphasis on the fear of the LORD as the beginning of wisdom – it fittingly concludes with a reemphasis. Listen to **Proverbs 31:30**, "*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*" This emphasis on having a fear (or reverent respect) of the LORD serves as a beautiful set of bookends for Proverbs.
  
- ❖ Now this concluding bookend is presented as a portrait of a praiseworthy woman. **She's often known as the Proverbs 31 woman.** Vv10-31 is essentially a poem dedicated to her. This is one of the best known passages in Proverbs. It's often read in church on Mother's Day or quoted and framed in craft rooms.
  - But, in all honesty, this may be one of the passages most dreaded by Christian women. **They look at the Proverbs 31 woman as an impossible standard.** Look at this woman – she excels at being this dutiful housewife who keeps her home running like a tight ship (vv13-15). And she's this awesome homeschooling mom whose teaching is described as kindness. And, at the same time, she's this amazing businesswoman who's good with money and makes great investments. She can do it all and do it all well! ***How can I ever live up to this Proverbs 31 woman?***

- ❖ That's what many Christian women are thinking. If this is the ideal biblical wife, then they feel like it's an impossible standard. And if men are measuring their wives against this Proverbs 31 woman, then it feels unfair. And if young men are using this as a measuring stick to find an excellent wife, then it feels like an exercise in futility. They'll never find someone so good.
- ❖ **But I think all these frustrations all stem from a basic misreading of the text.** You can't see it in an English translation, but it's crucial to understand that this passage is an **acrostic poem** that follows the Hebrew alphabet. Every verse begins with a successive letter. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and thus 22 verses.
  - So what that means is that this passage was not written to be read as a checklist for you to achieve. **But, as one commentator puts it, think of it more like a string of pearls for you to admire.** It's like the author – we're told that King Lemuel (not Solomon) wrote chapter 31 – he was using poetic license to come up with various attributes that characterize a godly, wise woman, stringing them together like pearls.
    - **It was never meant to be an exhaustive checklist for the ideal wife.** Notice how there are key attributes missing. There's no mention of her relationship with her husband nor any reference to her devotional life. **Again, this passage is not giving us a checklist to achieve but a string of pearls to admire.**
- ❖ **And it's not just a passage for you wives or even just for you women.** This is a passage for all of us. It doesn't just tell us what an excellent wife looks like – **it's tell us what a wise life looks like.** If we consider the larger context of the book, we start to realize that this Proverbs 31 woman is yet another personification of Wisdom – like we saw back in chapters 8 and 9. Recall how folly (contrast to wisdom) was also personified as a Woman (7; 9:13-18).
  - **Friends, that means whether you're a man or woman; single or married; the Proverbs 31 woman is completely relevant.** She's meant to inspire you. She's not meant to crush your spirits with an unattainable standard. **But rather to lift your spirits – to inspire you (all of you) to live more wisely.**
    - So, as we cover this text and admire this inspiring woman, let's consider three aspirations. (1) Aspire to the heroic faithfulness of the Proverbs 31 woman. (2) Aspire to her diligent fruitfulness. (3) Aspire to her proper fearfulness.

### **Aspire to Her Heroic Faithfulness**

- ❖ The first aspiration is to aspire to the heroic faithfulness of the Proverbs 31 woman. That's the characteristic being praised in vv10-12. Listen again, *"<sup>10</sup>An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. <sup>11</sup>The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. <sup>12</sup>She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life."*
  - The poem begins with a rhetorical question: Who can find an excellent wife? The point is that she's a rare find. She's priceless. She's far more precious than jewels.
    - **Now what I found interesting is that commentators would call this a "heroic poem". It's not a love song.** That surprised me. I always thought this was a love ballad. But it's more like an ode to a champion.

- ❖ I don't think the way the ESV translates that phrase “*an excellent wife*” is helpful. A better phrase would be "a noble wife / a worthy wife / a valiant wife – who can find?" It's the same Hebrew word used in Judges to describe Gideon as a “*mighty man of valor*” (Judg 6:12). There are military overtones in this word. The basic meaning conveys strength and power.
  - **So, this is a heroic poem praising a woman engaged in the battlefield of life.** All the heroism typically found in battle – which inspires us and moves us to action – can also be found *in the home*. Just as Israel's judges (like Gideon) were a blessing to God's people through their military exploits – **this Proverbs 31 woman is an equally heroic figure who blesses others through her exploits in her home life** – in the care and protection of her family.
  
- ❖ **So the point, again, is that we shouldn't read this passage as a soul-crushing, guilt-inducing, impossible standard we'll never live up to.** No, is that how you would read a Medal of Honor citation? Is that how you would respond to a movie about the heroic acts of common citizens? I was recently watching a documentary that touched on the events of 9/11. When you think about those heroic passengers on United 93 who brought down the fourth plane before it could be used to kill thousands more – do you think to yourself, “Oh I feel so guilty that I can't live up to that”?
  - That would be an unhealthy and inappropriate response. **You should look at heroes like that and be inspired. To aspire to even a fraction of their heroism.** To exhibit a similar valor and nobility in the smaller battlefields of life. So, in the same way, that's how we should respond to this heroic poem about the Proverbs 31 woman.
  
- ❖ This, again, is why I think that word "excellent" can be problematic. Because when we read about being an excellent wife – **it's hard for us *not* to think about excellence in terms of performance.** To be an excellent musician, excellent athlete, or excellent student speaks of your performance. So it's natural to interpret an excellent wife in v10 in the same way.
  - But look again at what's being praised about this woman. Sure, we're going to see in subsequent verses that she's very productive and bears good fruit. **But notice how she's praised here in vv10-12 – not for her performance and achievements – but for her faithfulness.** For her trustworthiness.
  
- ❖ **It says her husband's heart trusts in her.** He has complete confidence to put his welfare – and their household's – in her hands. As he goes to the city gates – which in ancient days was like city hall where leaders dealt with civil matters – as he goes to conduct business on behalf of the city, he trusts that she's taking care of business on behalf of their family.
  - **That's what makes her so priceless to her husband. She's more precious than jewels. She herself is his treasure, so that's why he can trust her with their family's treasures.** Under her watch, he lacks nothing. She's faithful. She's trusted. That's the attribute being highlighted.

- ❖ **And that's the attribute for us to emulate. To aspire to. It's about being faithful with whatever responsibility we've been given.** To be a man, woman, or child worthy of trust.
  - Don't be crushed by the Proverbs 31 woman. **Don't fret over trying to be this renaissance woman who seems super capable and able to balance work life and home life without a hitch.** Look, the truth is you may never achieve the same accomplishments as this woman. You may never even have the opportunities – to be a wife, or a mom, or a businesswoman or professional. But all that's besides the point.
    - The point is: Take a good look at her. Whether you're a woman, man, or child. Look at her and be inspired. **Be in awe of her heroic faithfulness to take whatever responsibility or opportunity given her and to carry it out faithfully.** That's all we're called to do in our own lives. That's what a life of wisdom looks like – heroic faithfulness.
  
- ❖ Ask yourself: **Am I a woman or a man who can be trusted with great responsibility? Would I be considered faithful?** Would someone consider you a precious treasure in their life because they can trust you with their treasures?
  - For those of you who are married, ask yourself: **Does my spouse trust me? Would my spouse praise me for being trustworthy?** Have I earned that trust? That's something you have to realize – **your spouse's trust has to be earned.**
  
- ❖ Now their love is different. **Your love for each other is not earned.** It's not condition by your performance. You don't stop loving your spouse because he or she failed you or your expectations. **The love between husband and wife is freely given (as an act of the will) bound by a covenant before God.** Just as God loves us freely and graciously, in the same way, love in marriage doesn't have to be earned.
  - But trust is different. You can lose trust. Because of something they did, you may no longer trust your spouse. But you can still love your spouse and remain committed to rebuilding that trust. **So if you're the one who was wrong, who has lost the trust of your spouse – I pray that this Proverbs 31 woman has awakened something in you. An aspiration to rebuild and re-earn the trust of your spouse.** What can you do this week to build back that trust?
  
- ❖ And for those of you who are not married, instead of using Proverbs 31 as a measuring stick for a potential spouse – use it as an inspirational example to become a truly heroic figure who earns the trust and respect of a potential spouse through your own faithfulness. **Commit yourself to becoming a person of integrity, a person who can be trusted with great responsibility and great treasure.** And one day, perhaps God will give you the treasure of a spouse and a family.

### **Aspire to Her Diligent Fruitfulness**

- ❖ So, the first aspiration that we should all aspire to is the Proverbs 31 woman's heroic faithfulness. **The second would be her diligent fruitfulness.** This attribute of hers is spelled out in vv13-27. And like we said, she's praised as a heroic figure.

- ❖ **In vv13-19, she's presented as an able businesswoman. This valiant wife is not cloistered in the home.** Her duties extend beyond the walls. She's in the marketplace. Purchasing goods and resources, providing for her family. V14 compares her to a merchant's ship bringing food from afar. **That's like saying she's goes the distance to feed her family.**
  - In v15, she's essentially compared to a lioness (or some other nocturnal hunter) who *"rises while it is yet night and provided food for her household."* It basically speaks to both her strength (v17) and her work ethic. **She's the early bird who gets the worm.**
    - And look at v16. She's a shrewd businesswoman capable of purchasing land. She's managing a vineyard – she's literally fruitful. In vv18-19, she's got a profitable business that she runs out of her own house (v24). She burns the midnight oil, working long hours after the kids are down.
  
- ❖ And again, I understand that, at this moment, the stay-at-home moms among us are feeling worthless. And the working moms are feeling discouraged for not being able to match this woman's productivity. Everyone's feeling bad, but that's only when we're forgetting that the Proverbs 31 woman is not a legalistic standard but an inspirational symbol.
  - **She's the epitome of a strong work ethic that was preached on earlier in this series** (6:6-11; 24:30-34). Everything Proverbs has praised in the wise worker and condemned in the lazy fool is wrapped up in this woman. Look at v27, *"She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness."*
    - But don't be crushed by her example. **Be inspired rather to greater diligence – to having a strong work ethic – in whatever realm of responsibility you're in and with whatever task you've been given.** That's the point.
  
- ❖ **The same could be said for her compassion towards the poor in v20.** In previous sermons, we preached on proverbs that emphasized generosity and compassion (22:9; 19:17; 28:27; 30:1-9). Look at how she exemplifies that in v20, *"She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy."*
  - This passage, as we said, is bookending Proverbs and wrapping up its major themes within this one woman. **Remember how we looked at proverbs about wise speech?** (10:19-21; 15:1-4) Look at v26, *"She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue."* She gives sound advice. She offers wise counsel.
    - **And remember how we preached on proverbs about making your plans but then committing them into God's sovereign hands?** (16:1-4) Look at v25, *"Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come."* She's not anxious about an uncertain future. Now laughing at the future is not suggesting a carelessness – but rather a confidence in the Lord and his sovereign plans for the future.
  
- ❖ For all these reasons, this Proverbs 31 woman is praised, especially by her family. Look at vv28-29, *"<sup>28</sup>Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: <sup>29</sup>Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."* There are other noble, valiant, heroic women out there – but my wife (my mother) has surpassed them all.

- ❖ **Friends, the point of this passage is for all of us to admire this amazing woman and to wonder to ourselves, “How is she so diligent and productive? How is she so compassionate and confident and wise in her speech? How is she so fruitful?”**
  - I’m going to assume you want this in your own life. You admire her. And you wish you could exhibit even a fraction of her wisdom and godliness. So, what do you do? How can you be more like her?
  
- ❖ Again, we have to remember that this passage is not giving a checklist for us to achieve. Remember, this is a poem that is stringing pearls for us to admire. And not just to admire the achievements of this woman – but to admire the very Wisdom that she personifies.
  - **And while she’s able to personify Wisdom, remember that there is Someone else in Scripture who went further and incarnated Wisdom.** 1 Corinthians 1:30 says Christ “*became to us wisdom from God*”. Jesus is the Wisdom of God incarnate.
  
- ❖ This is why we need to read and apply Proverbs 31 within the larger storyline of Scripture, and to recognize that – **all the good works that this woman personifies can bear forth in our lives only through a relationship with the incarnate Wisdom of God.**
  - If you simply read Proverbs 31 in isolation, apart from the gospel, you’ll try you’re hardest to imitate this woman and her good works – but you’ll find yourself consistently falling short and failing to bear fruit. **Such good works cannot be self-generated. You can’t bear forth this kind of fruit on your own.**
    - The Christian message says that the seed of the gospel needs to be planted in your heart first. I’m talking about a mustard seed of faith, trusting in Jesus as the Lord and Savior who died for your sins and was raised for your salvation.
      - And then that seed of the gospel, once implanted, produces new life. You are a new person in Christ. **Then out of that new relationship with Wisdom incarnate – you begin to bear the fruits of Wisdom.** You begin to resemble the wisdom of this Proverbs 31 woman.
  
- ❖ That’s how this works. Your admiration for the fruitfulness of this amazing woman shouldn’t stop there. She’s meant to point you to Someone else. **Wisdom personified in Proverbs points you to Wisdom incarnate in the Gospels.** Your relationship with Christ is of foremost importance. That's reaffirmed in our third aspiration.

### **Aspire to Her Proper Fearfulness**

- ❖ The first aspiration is towards her heroic faithfulness. The second is towards her diligent fruitfulness. **The third aspiration is towards her proper fearfulness of the Lord.** Look with me at v30, “*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*” This, of course, is the most well-known verse of this poem. **It’s quite telling that in a poem valorizing a woman, the only mention of beauty or physical attraction is actually set in the negative.** It’s a non-factor. It’s vain and fleeting.

- ❖ **But to not include her beauty when trying to describe an excellent wife would've been unheard of in ancient literature, as it would be today in modern depictions of the picture perfect wife.** We give an inordinate amount of attention to physical beauty.
  
- ❖ **So much of our anxiety, so many of our fears, are tied to our insecurities about how we look.** Just think about how much time we waste looking at ourselves in the mirror, wishing we had different hair, a better complexion, a smaller nose, bigger eyes, less wrinkles, etc. It goes on and on because there's no end if you're chasing after physical beauty. **Whatever standard you're chasing will be unattainable – because the standard itself is always changing.** That's what it means when it says beauty is fleeting. It's a moving standard so you'll never be satisfied.
  - **But the one key trait worthy of praise, worthy of our chase, worthy of our time and attention – is a proper fear of the Lord.** As we said, this trait is prominent in the beginning and end of Proverbs. It's the one thing that fundamentally distinguishes this woman from all the negative portrayals of women in this book. She has a proper fear of the Lord.
  
- ❖ That doesn't mean she's scared of the Lord. **There's a difference between fearing the Lord and being scared of the Lord.** Think about it: A good, loving father wants his children to fear him, but he doesn't want them to be scared of him. We would say it's a good sign if his kids respect him, if they revere his words, and if they fear his hand of discipline. But it would be a bad sign, if the man's children are flat out scared of him and what he might do to them.
  - **So when it comes to our relationship with the Heavenly Father, fear is not incompatible with love.** You can simultaneously love God and fear God. But you can't love God and be scared of him at the same time.
  
- ❖ **If you're not a Christian – if you don't have a loving relationship with God the Father – you should be scared of him (if you take his Word seriously).** You should be scared of what he might do to you. He can condemn you for your sins. He can bring down the sword of justice on your head. He can damn you to eternal punishment and be perfectly just to do so.
  - But if you receive the salvation that Jesus accomplished on the cross – if you trust him as your Savior who let the sword of justice fall on his own head instead of yours – **then you have no need to be scared of God anymore.** You don't have to worry about what he might do to you out of anger. Because God is no longer angry towards you. Your sins has been covered by Christ.
    - **And now as a Christian, you can fear God for who he is and not for what he might do to you.** That's a proper fear of the LORD. That's the proper fearfulness of the Proverbs 31 woman. She feared God for who he is and not for what he might do to her.

- ❖ That's her most prominent attribute. That's what made her so praiseworthy and what made her so attractive. But the problem is that very few have the eyes to see that. **Sadly, we've been trained to look for beauty on the surface – to focus on outer beauty.** We care far too much about our looks, and we put far too much weight on looks when looking for a spouse.
  
- ❖ **The fact is most people put all their effort into maintaining their physical beauty, their outer beauty.** By working out, dieting, trying new hairstyles, getting facial treatments, or even plastic surgery. But all the while, giving little attention to inner beauty – to "*the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious.*" (1 Peter 3:4)
  - But if all you focus on in life is outer beauty, then one day you're going to look in the mirror and wonder what happened. **As you grow older, it doesn't change your inner beauty, but it certainly changes your outer beauty.** Age affects your body shape, your appearance, your skin, your hairline, your hair color, etc.
    - **To look good in your youth is no accomplishment. But to look incredible after 40 years, after 60 years, after 70 – now that is a feat to be praised.** That takes wisdom. That means you must have been working, over all those years, to adorn the inner, imperishable beauty of the heart.
  
- ❖ **The most beautiful people in the world aren't found on runways or magazine covers. They're found in nursing homes.** Clinging to a Bible in one hand and a photo of their spouse in the other. In a room filled with those who love them, who are now saying their goodbyes. The beauty of these individuals shines through their faithfulness to the people they loved; their fruitfulness in a life well lived; and ultimately in their fearfulness of the Lord their God who is going to welcome them home.