

Finding Honor
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Proverbs 31

Any teacher that wants to connect with will try to put himself or herself in the “minds” of their audience asking, how will this material strike people? What is their likely reaction? How do I hope they will receive it? What do I hope they will DO with it? You can’t read minds but you do imagine what thoughts and ideas might emerge based on the topic.

Today we wrap up our study in the book of Proverbs with the legendary chapter 31, a poetic look at the virtuous wife. I can imagine several potential reactions. Some may think: “I’ve heard this so many times I’ll just kind of smile and check out.” The men in the group might think fondly of their wife, Mom, or grandmother and that would be appropriate.

Then I think about the women in the group when they are confronted with the “Wonder Woman” of Proverbs 31. Here is a portrait of a woman who is able to accomplish anything and everything with amazing skill, poise, and productivity. She’s the definition of “Pinterest perfect.” I can imagine eyes rolling and women thinking: “I hate that Proverbs 31 woman and I didn’t pack for a guilt trip!” We can admire the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31 without sending women on “guilt trip.”

Big Idea: The Proverbs 31 woman should be a guideline not a guilt trip. Her qualities are an admirable standard to aim for not a “to do” list to be accomplished every day. The key to a life of honor is captured in just one verse. It’s something that every follower of Christ (woman or man) can accomplish.

- Before the text, a little context - A king named Lemuel wrote this chapter. It contains wise words from the king’s mother: First, don’t ruin your life chasing wild women and guzzling wine. Instead, be a king who looks out for the poor and

helpless “and see that they get justice.” Secondly, here are the characteristics of an “excellent wife.”

- Mom was clever enough to write the poem about a wife as an “acrostic” using all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet at the start of each verse.
- Let’s consider these verses, and then consider how we can all (both women and men) benefit from them.

Proverbs 31:10–31 (ESV)

¹⁰An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.

¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

¹²She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

²³Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.

- The Hebrew word for “excellent” speaks of strength, ability, and noble character. It is used to describe great armies as well as an excellent wife. She is virtuous and valiant (showing courage or determination.)
- The excellent wife is the most precious blessing a man can have! She is priceless to her husband and it all begins with total trust.
- If you have a spouse you can’t trust, you married the wrong person!
- When a man marries an excellent woman, his “stock goes up” in life.
- It’s not hyperbole when I say anything I have accomplished in life would not have been possible without Susan’s influence. That’s not just “buttering her up,” those who know Susan and me know it’s the truth.
- The excellent wife enhances her husband’s quality of life and reputation. She helps and doesn’t harm. Some of her greatest help is smoothing the rough edges most men have.
- The next few verses speak to the work ethic of the excellent wife.

¹³She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. ¹⁴She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. ¹⁵She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. ¹⁶She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. ¹⁷She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. ¹⁸She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. ¹⁹She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. ²⁰She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. ²¹She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. ²²She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. ²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant. ²⁵Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. ²⁶She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. ²⁷She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

- The excellent wife of these verses is energetic, industrious, talented, and hard working both inside and outside the home.
- Some believe Proverbs 31 is a chauvinistic effort to box a woman into the role of a passive, domestic “little woman.” Clearly they haven’t read those verses. This woman is anything but shy and retiring!
- One commentator writes: “...*in that agrarian society women actually filled roles that were the same as men... [e]ach of these is a “business” function, and while the woman’s activities were linked to her home and family, the biblical picture of the woman’s role is a far cry from the “stay-home-and-care-for-the-kids” concept... [i]n Old Testament times women had the opportunity to use their God-given abilities.*”ⁱ
- Max Anders: “*While the New Testament passages are often criticized by feminists for suggesting that wives should be submissive to husbands, Proverbs 31 presents a picture of a wife who is anything but passive, underproductive, and unappreciated. Here we see a woman of extraordinary skill, great drive, and expansive involvement who is valued by her husband and known in the community for her achievements and stature. When all the passages of Scripture are taken together, a picture becomes clear of a woman who is free to*

*become all that God intended her to be. Proverbs 31 is a central passage in creating this picture.*ⁱⁱ

- While we admire the ability and accomplishments in these verses, this is where the “guilt trip” for women could begin if we misinterpret them.
- In the first place, the woman described here had a staff of workers reporting to her (v.15.) Remember, Lemuel was a king and his mother was describing the excellent wife for a wealthy royal who could supply her with an infrastructure of servants and resources to “do business.”
- There’s a larger point to be made about this whole section of Proverbs 31.
- Vicki Courtney wrote a book on properly interpreting this passage. Listen to her words about her reaction when she first confronted it as a young woman: *“By the time I got to the verse where this capable wife makes her own bed coverings, I wanted to curl up in my own store-bought comforter and sleep off my depression. Was this woman for real? No wonder she’s worth far more than jewels. She’s doing the job of 20 people! Did she stay hyped-up on a steady stream of 5-Hour Energy® to knock out her to-do list? If this was the template for becoming a godly wife and mother, I was in big trouble.”*ⁱⁱⁱ (Her article: <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/homelife-confessions-of-a-proverbs-31-flunkie>)
- Upon careful study, Vicki Courtney had a “light bulb” breakthrough: *“I made a startling discovery: The Proverbs 31 woman was not an actual, real woman. All these years I’d felt intimidated by this woman, only to discover she’s make-believe! The passage is actually a compilation of virtuous qualities that women should strive to have. Whew!”*^{iv}
- The ESV Study Bible: *“...this profile is an ideal: a particular example of full-scale virtue and wisdom toward which the faithful are willing to be molded. It is not expected that any one woman will look exactly like this in every respect.”*^v
- This passage is a standard to shoot for not a “to do” list to be accomplished every day by every wife and mother.
- It’s also a picture of a “lifetime” of excellence not a “snapshot” in time.

- Andreas Kostenberger writes in *Marriage and the Family*:
“Rather than viewing these qualities as existing in a woman all at one time, depicting a day in the life of the ideal woman, one may view these attributes as having developed over a period of time and as being exhibited in a woman’s life during different occasions and seasons of life” (p. 26).^{vi}
- Ladies, don’t beat yourself up in perfectionism because this chapter isn’t what life at your house looks like every day. This passage is about striving, with God’s power and strength, to do your best over a lifetime.
- At a funeral, I’ve never heard a husband or child talk about the days the dishes piled up or there were dust bunnies under the sofa. I HAVE heard them praise a lifetime of love, support, humor, fun, and godly teaching.
- By the way, there are lots of biblical standards for husbands that we can’t live up to every day either. The fact is no woman or man CAN live up to God’s standard perfectly. That’s why we have forgiveness and grace.
- So, what is the outcome of having this kind of woman as wife and mom?

²⁸Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:

²⁹“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.”

- Excellent wives enhance mediocre husbands, and raise grateful children.
- The lesson for us men (and children of wonderful moms) is the be sure we “rise up and call her blessed.” When I read this passage I get a little choked up because of what I saw in my Mother, my Grandmothers, and Susan, and what I see emerging in my daughter and daughter-in-law. Without any reservation I can rise up and call them all blessed.
- They are not perfect; but they ARE perfect for their families in doing their best to be excellent, valiant women.
- Now, I promised at the beginning that the most important quality of this whole passage is one that every woman (and every man for that matter) can accomplish with God’s help. It’s all contained in verse thirty.

³⁰Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

- We end our study of Proverbs right where we began in Proverbs 1:7a (ESV) ⁷The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...
- King Lemuel's mom had already warned him about those wild women, now she draws the comparison. Don't be deceived by charm and outward beauty. Charm can be faked and these days so can beauty! Physical beauty will fade just as a flower wilts over time, but a woman who fears the Lord is growing more beautiful and vibrant in spirit as the years pass.
- This isn't just for women. Every follower of Christ can be excellent if our foundation is reverence for God and a passionate desire to please Him.
- And what is the reward for the excellent wife and mom?

³¹Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

- The excellent, God-fearing woman won't need a PR person at the end of her life; her work will speak for itself. Not because she was perfect, but because she did her best for those she loved and for her Lord, and her best was sufficient for them to rise up and call her blessed.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Men, rise up and call her blessed and teach your kids to do the same.
- Parents of not-yet-married kids, help them have the correct view of what a godly spouse is and is not. Pray that they find one that fears the Lord.
- Finally, ladies, reading Proverbs 31 shouldn't mean you have to "pack for a guilt trip." Don't beat yourselves up over this passage. Take it as inspiration for growth not as fuel for perfectionism and low self-esteem. Fear God, do your best, and you will be blessed.

ⁱ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible reader's companion* (electronic ed., p. 394).

ⁱⁱ Anders, Max. Holman Old Testament Commentary - Proverbs: 13 . B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/homelife-confessions-of-a-proverbs-31-flunkie>

^{iv} ibid

^v Crossway Bibles. ESV Study Bible (Kindle Locations 81087-81089). Good News Publishers/Crossway Books. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} **God, Marriage, and Family:** Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation Andreas J. Köstenberger, David W. Jones - Crossway, May 5, 2010 - Religion - 400 pages