

I’ve observed over the years that many women are intimidated by the “Proverbs 31 woman.”
 “No matter how hard I try, I just can’t measure up!”
 It seems unattainable!

But the Proverbs 31 woman is not a standard to be “attained.”
 That is not the picture here.

I want you to see the true beauty of the Proverbs 31 woman –
 a beauty that you are to bless –
 and a beauty in which *you participate!*

Perhaps the best way to see what I mean is to start with how this can go badly.

In the book of Kings, Jezebel is portrayed as the Proverbs 31 woman run amok.

In 1 Kings 21, Ahab wants Naboth’s vineyard.
 So she considers a field and buys it – well, not quite buys it –
 “acquires it through deceit and treachery” would be more accurate.
 Certainly “the heart of her husband trusts in her...”
 “She does him ‘good’” – at least according to *his standards...*
 She opens her hand to the poor – *and smites him...*

So we could say that Jezebel is the *anti*-Proverbs 31 woman –
 just like Ahab is the *anti-Solomon*
 (after all, Ahab built the temple of Baal in his father’s city, Samaria –
 just like Solomon built the temple of the LORD in his father’s city, Jerusalem.)

Jesus approves of this understanding of Jezebel –
 after all, in his letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3,
 he refers to *that woman Jezebel* who corrupts the churches.

So *who is* this Proverbs 31 woman?

Throughout this series, I have continued to speak of the Father and the Son –
 using some ambiguity –
 is this God the Father speaking to his beloved Son?
 or is this simply the wise “father” teaching wisdom to his Israelite son.

You know how to answer that: “yes!”

So who is talking here?

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:

Who is this “Lemuel”?

We do not know.

He was a king (some suggest that this is an alternate name for Solomon,
but we don't know that).

And this is an oracle that his mother taught him.

Solomon's mother was Bathsheba –

and *maybe* you are supposed to think about Bathsheba as the voice behind the text.

But what is *really* important here is not the *name* of his mother –
but the fact that this oracle was taught to the king by his mother.

At the end of this oracle King Lemuel will tell us that her children bless the Proverbs 31 woman.

Okay.

I'll stop beating around the bush.

The Proverbs 31 woman is not *you*.

She's your mother!

The bride of Christ – the church.

The church is the one who *is* the Proverbs 31 woman.

Why do I say this?

Well, let's look more closely at chapter 31.

Proverbs 31 has two parts:

the excellent king and the excellent wife.

The connection between them is found in the parallels between verse 9

“Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy”
and verse 20:

“She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.”

And verse 26

“She opens her mouth with wisdom...”

The excellent wife and the excellent king go together.

Indeed, this is the point that Lemuel's mother is making!

1. The Wise King (31:1-9)

² *What are you doing, my son?*^[a] *What are you doing, son of my womb?*

What are you doing, son of my vows?

³ *Do not give your strength to women,
your ways to those who destroy kings.*

Lemuel's mother warns him against two evils,
and urges him to speak righteously.

First, she warns him not to give his strength to women—

“those who destroy kings.”

David and Solomon loom large in the background here.

David got into a great deal of trouble with women—
and Solomon was destroyed by women.

And so Lemuel’s mother warns him of giving his strength to women.

The second line is crucial for understanding what this means:

“your *ways*”

Proverbs has spoken much of “the way” of the righteous, and the “way” of the wicked.

There is the way of wisdom and the way of folly.

If you give your ways to women,
then you are a fool.

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding;

in all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Prov 3:4-5)

Commit your ways to the LORD—not to women.

Let him direct your paths—and do not follow the desires of the flesh,
but walk by the Spirit!

Second, Lemuel’s mother warns him

⁴ *It is not for kings, O Lemuel,*

it is not for kings to drink wine,

or for rulers to take strong drink,

⁵ *lest they drink and forget what has been decreed
and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.*

If the king is drunk,
then anything can happen.

A drunken king can ruin an innocent life.

He may regret it in the morning,
but he is the king, and it is too late.

This is echoed by Paul in his requirement that a bishop must not be a drunkard,
and a deacon must not be “addicted to much wine.” (1 Tim 3:3, 8)

If you are in a position of authority,
then you must not allow yourself to get drunk.

I never know when someone will call and need counsel.

If I am drunk, then I will be unable to give wise counsel to one in need.

The next line, however, suggests that there is a time to get tipsy:

⁶ *Give strong drink to the one who is perishing,
and wine to those in bitter distress;*^[b]

⁷ *let them drink and forget their poverty
and remember their misery no more.*

We are familiar with the commands in Deuteronomy to drink wine and strong drink
in times of rejoicing (Dt 14:26),

but Lemuel’s mother points out that there is also a time to drown your sorrows!

And the king is commanded to “give” wine and strong drink to those in need.

(I would note in passing that this could be used to argue for biblical support for a state-funded healthcare system at least for the poor-- not that scripture “requires” it, but that wisdom calls upon rulers to provide medicine for the poor)

Lemuel’s mother then urges her son to
⁸ *Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.*^[c]
⁹ *Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

A wise and righteous ruler will be zealous to protect the weak and helpless.
In all these matters, Jesus proves himself to be the wise and righteous king.
Jesus defends the rights of the poor and needy—
he protects the downtrodden.
And he calls us to do the same.
Whether the rulers of our country do a good job of this or not,
we are called, as those who are in Christ, to defend the rights of the poor and needy.

So – notice the pattern of the excellent King:
Who is the excellent King?
Jesus.
Does that mean that these verses are irrelevant to us?
No!
Because we are *in Christ* – and we are fellow-heirs with him of *his kingdom*.

2. The Valiant Wife (31:10-31)

So you probably won’t be surprised that I view the rest of chapter 31 the same way!

Now, this poem is an acrostic.
Its 22 verses each begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

We often think of Proverbs 31 as a poem for women,
describing what a Christian woman should aspire to be.
And you *can* get there – but only in a roundabout way.

After all, the poem functions as the conclusion of Proverbs—
a book written for young men who are beginning on the way of life –
a book written by the Father for his Son.

These are words that Lemuel’s mother taught him –
and as they are woven into the book of Proverbs,
they reflect the father’s teaching in chapters 1-9
telling his son about Lady Wisdom.

We see first:

a. Her Value (10-12)

¹⁰ ^[d] *An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.*

Many have noted that the noun translated “excellent”
is generally translated “army” “man of valor” or “host.”
So you could translate this, “A woman of valor who can find?”

It’s worth pointing out that even if this was intended as a description of an “ideal woman” –
the text itself makes clear that she is very rare!

But then it says that she is “far more precious than jewels” –
a phrase that reminds us of Proverbs 3:15 (speaking of Wisdom) –
“she is more precious than jewels”
and in Proverbs 8:11 – “wisdom is better than jewels.”

So the Proverbs 31 woman is being identified with Wisdom.
Back in chapters 1-9, the Father had urged his Son to marry Wisdom –
to spend his life with Wisdom – and devote himself to Wisdom.

Consider this remarkable woman:

¹¹ *The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.*
¹² *She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.*

I don’t doubt that Jezebel was devoted to her husband, Ahab.
She saw that he was depressed and she wanted to do him good!

Unfortunately, her idea of “doing good” brought great harm upon him.
It’s why we need to beware of trusting in our own understanding!

My “bright ideas” have never yet brought about the kingdom of God!

But watch this woman at work!

b. Her Activities (13-27)

1) Her Labor (v13-19)

Look at what she does:

She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. (v13)
She is diligent and hard working.

She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. (v14)
She wants the best and finest things for her husband.

She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. (v15b)

We need to recognize that this is speaking of a time when the “household” consisted of dozens, and in some cases, hundreds of people.

She is not a housewife in a modern, nuclear family.

She is the lady of a great house.

And although she has high status, and has many servants,

she is not lazy—she is not what Amos referred to as the “cows of Bashan” who do not move from their couches and say to their husbands,

“bring, that we may drink!” (Amos 4:1)

Although she is a “mighty woman” she does not think of herself as one to be served, but who herself serves even her own maidens.

In other words, she has learned the way of the cross –
she is a picture of Christ.

In verses 16-18 there are multiple connections to the parables of Christ.

She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. (v16)

Too often we read too much into this.

I’ve heard many preachers say,

“ah, well, of course she consulted with her husband first!”

That is not what the passage says—neither is it what the passage means.

Lemuel’s mother has already pointed out that *she does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.*

So when she buys the field, she is doing it for his good—

and he praises her for her diligence and wisdom in doing it!

She dresses herself with strength (literally, “girds her loins”) and makes her arms strong. (v17)

If this were a man we would say that she is preparing herself for battle.

She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. (v18)

In other words, she is like a merchant.

(And this does not mean that she never sleeps—but rather that she never runs out of oil)

She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. (v19)

This may sound rather domestic (and no doubt it has that aspect as well), but there are pictures from the ancient near east of a warrior goddess, whose weapon is the distaff.

And in light of her girding her loins and making her arms strong,

this would suggest that the excellent wife is a powerful woman

who calls up images of Deborah and Jael, not just some quiet domestic type!

But given the fact that Lemuel’s mother is telling *the King of Israel – the Son of David* – to look for a wife who embodies the attributes of Lady Wisdom –

I cannot help but see something bigger here than ordinary domestic life!

Indeed, when you look at her achievements in verses 20-27,
you see even more:

2) Her Achievements (v20-27)

She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. (v20)

In light of the first part of the chapter,

this demonstrates that the excellent wife looks very much like an excellent king!

And this imagery is only further substantiated by verses 21-22:

She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.

She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

The excellent wife is a royal wife, arrayed in fine linen and purple.

The phrase is used in Esther of royalty –

but also in Exodus of the high priest.

(In Revelation 18 it becomes the clothing of the great Harlot –
Jezebel run amok – the anti-church).

So, just for those of you who have been trying to “imitate” the Proverbs 31 woman,

Please stop!

If you try too hard to be “like” her – you may only succeed in becoming like Jezebel!

If you are in Christ – you are *already* her!

Because she is the church – the bride of Christ – the mother of believers!

By the time you get to verse 23, you are beginning to wonder where the husband is in all of this.

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

He has such a great reputation because of her!

And no, it is not because she takes care of all the household chores,

so that he has the time to make himself great.

The very clear impression that Proverbs 31 gives us

is that his reputation has come from her work!

Christ is known in the gates because his bride – the church – has done his greatest deeds!

She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.

Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. (v24-25)

And she is a teacher as well!

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. (v26)

Again, she is like the excellent king.

She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. (v27)

And because of this:

c. Her Praise (28-31)

²⁸ *Her 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.”*
³⁰ *Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*
³¹ *Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.*

We – as children of the free woman –
as children of the heavenly Jerusalem –
are to bless our mother.
Jesus – the bridegroom – praises her as well!

Again, remember that this is the oracle that Lemuel’s mother taught him.
Son, remember to praise your wife – praise your bride.
And teach your children to bless their mother.

Conclusion: Wisdom and the Excellent Wife

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

Throughout the OT, as God spoke of Jerusalem as his “wife,”
we hear of the unfaithfulness of Zion—how the city of God has played the harlot.

This is why Jesus comes to lay down his life for his bride.
He must come, as the second Adam, to lay down his life for his wife.
And now we, as the bride of Christ,
are called to be the excellent wife to him!

We are to be a diligent and faithful wife,
who devote ourselves to “doing him good and not harm,” all of our days.
Christ, our bridegroom, is to be known in gates!
We, as a church, are to speak wisdom and teach kindness.

And that means that Proverbs 31 still speaks to each household as well.
As the church lives as the Proverbs 31 woman,
it is still useful to reflect on how our homes should reflect Christ and the church.

The economy has changed.
The days of the household economy are over.

Proverbs 31 should remind us that our culture's standards—
whether the dominant culture where the two shall remain on their own separate career paths,
or the evangelical subculture where the wife shall stay at home and be domestic—
these are not the standards of the Word of God.

The two shall become one flesh.

Your household needs to have one purpose.

You need to have a common way of thinking, and knowing, and speaking, and doing.

Your unity as one flesh needs to be expressed in action as well as purpose.