

THE WISE WOMAN  
PROVERBS 31:10-31

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The challenge that I have often faced on Mother's Day is finding the right gift for the mothers in my life. So I appreciated this story about the three sons who grew up on a farm and wanted to honor their mom on Mother's Day when she turned 80. The sons all had left the farm and pursued other interests and had done well in life. So the boys decided to do something special for their mom on this particular Mother's Day.

The oldest son, who had succeeded in the construction industry, decided to build his mom a house. The second son, who also had a successful career, decided to provide his mom with a Mercedes limousine, and to pay for a driver who would always be available to give her a ride wherever she wanted to go. The third son knew that his mom enjoyed reading the Bible but was faced with failing eyesight. So he decided to do something creative. He learned about a parrot who, through extensive training, had been taught to recite the whole Bible. He could even respond properly when he was asked to recite a chapter and verse. It cost this son a small fortune to buy this bird, but he spent the money and sent it to his mother.

So after these Mother's Day gifts had been delivered to their mom, she wrote letters to each of her three sons. The first one went like this: **"Milton, the house you built is huge. I live in only one room, but I have to clean the whole house."** To the second son she wrote, **"Gerald, I am too old to travel. I stay home most of the time. So I rarely use the Mercedes. And the driver is so rude!"** The best response came to the third son: **"Dearest Donald. You have the good sense to know what your mother really likes. The chicken was so delicious!"**

It is tough to be a mom today. It is tough to be a woman. Our culture sends so many conflicting messages about how a woman and mom should live. Our girls are even being taught that they can consider changing their gender.

For those who decide to keep their female gender, there is the celebrity-glamor-Sports Illustrated message that says that women should focus upon their physical appearance. That is the most important thing in life. Then there is the career woman-success message. Security and significance in life for a woman come from developing a career and succeeding as a professional woman. Then there is the "you can have it all" message. Actress Jada Pinkett Smith received an award years ago from the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations. In her remarks she said, **"Women, you can have it all--- a loving man, devoted husband, loving children, a fabulous career. We are a new generation of women."**

Then there is the traditional, stay-at-home, housewife model, which is obviously politically incorrect. Feminist journalist and author Vivian Gornick declares, **“Being a housewife is an illegitimate profession.”** (*The Daily Illini*, April 25, 1981)

For people who are interested in God’s perspective on the issue the Bible has something to say about this. We have been studying the Book of Proverbs in recent weeks. Last week we began studying what this Old Testament book has to say about the words which we use. We will continue that study next week. But since this is Mother’s Day and since Proverbs has a classic passage on the role of mothers, it seemed necessary to consider the wisdom which this book has to offer us on that subject. So today we will look at #31 in Proverbs to see what it has to tell us about understanding and appreciating the proper priorities for the moms and women among us.

I.

Consider first THE SETTING of this passage. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE SETTING) The Book of Proverbs falls into a category that the scholars call “wisdom literature.” It contains principles about how to live wisely. For those of you who have not been with us in recent weeks, I have suggested that an accurate definition of the original word for “wisdom” that appears in this book is “skill in godly, daily living.” The Book is attributed to King Solomon, the son of David. He may have written many of these proverbs. Others were collected from various sources. They are addressed at the beginning of the book to the king’s sons. They may have been compiled partly to train other young men who were being prepared for government service. They contain positive encouragements and negative warnings. Among other things the king warns his sons to be on guard against the wrong kind of women--- the adulteresses, the noisy, the foolish, the rebellious, and the quarrelsome. But then at the end of the book he provides them with the ideal picture of the wise woman.

At the beginning of Chapter 31 the text says in v. 1, **“The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him...”** We have no clue who King Lemuel is. He is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible or secular history. But it should be noted that the words of this chapter are credited to another woman, the king’s mother.

The portrait of the wise woman begins in v. 10, and it is written in the form of an acrostic. That means that beginning with aleph in v. 10 each succeeding verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. This use of an acrostic was helpful in memorizing important passages in the Hebrew Bible.

The picture that we have portrayed in this passage of the ideal, wise woman could be overwhelming to anyone who is trying to live up to these standards. It could create resentment from gals who realize that they will never match up. It would also be virtually impossible for any young woman who would be a candidate to be a wife for young King Lemuel to already have all of these characteristics.

We should also keep in mind the encouragement of the Apostle Paul that he gives in the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians that if single men and women are able to do so, it is better to stay single. Single Christians are able to accomplish certain things for the Lord that married people with families are not.

There are also a couple of assumptions that we need to keep in mind as we examine this portrait. One is that it assumes a background of the Ancient Near East. There were a lot of things that were different about that cultural setting from our cultural setting today. It is also important to realize that the author was assuming that the ideal woman came from a wealthy, upper class background. Reference is made to having maidens in the house who help with domestic duties. Wouldn't that be nice for all of us to have?

With all of that being said, there are lessons that we can learn from looking at this wise woman. There are qualities that she has that are worth emulating. For us who are men-- we can praise and appreciate the women in our lives who exhibit the positive qualities that are described here. I find that these qualities fall into six categories.

II.

First, from vv. 10-12 we find that THE WISE WOMAN IS AN EXCELLENT WIFE. (II. THE WISE WOMAN IS...) The author writes, **“An excellent wife who can find?/ She is far more precious than jewels./ The heart of her husband trusts in her,/ and he will have no lack of gain./ She does him good, and not harm,/ all the days of her life.”**

A key term in these verses is the Hebrew word translated here as “excellent.” In the original Hebrew it is *chayil*. (CHAYIL) Some of you have been in Bible studies where I have explained that word. It is fairly common in the Old Testament. It has the basic meaning of “strong.” It is often used of warriors. Sometimes it is used of an army. In some contexts it is used to describe wealthy people. They are strong in money. It is only rarely used of women. But it is used to describe the Old Testament character Ruth. It is translated into English in our passage by other translators as “noble,” “virtuous,” and “capable.”

Perhaps a helpful verse to look at to grasp the meaning of the word is another proverb that speaks of a *chayil* woman. It is Proverbs 12:4. (PROVERBS 12:4) There we read: **“A *chayil* wife is the crown of her husband,/ but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones.”** The second line of the proverb seems to describe the opposite of a *chayil* wife. So perhaps the idea of a “virtuous” or “strong in character” wife is close to the mark. This is a wife who brings pride to her husband, not shame.

It is also important to see that this is not a wimpy, mousy, subservient individual. For we have to keep in mind that the root meaning of *chayil* is “strong.” This is a true partner in marriage. This is a vital member of a team. (PROJECTOR OFF)

To find such a woman is rare. Her worth is far more precious than jewels. Usually trust in the Old Testament for anyone other than God is condemned. But here to have a wife

that can be trusted is affirmed. The husband can trust her with family finances. He does not have to worry that she will max out the credit card or drain the checking account. He trusts her judgment, especially in the realm of domestic affairs.

The husband can trust that she will do him good and not harm. She will look out for his best interests. She will encourage him. That was one of the key things that attracted me to my wife. I recognized that she was an encourager. To have a woman who encourages and consistently builds a guy up is something that most men appreciate.

It is important to notice that in this discussion of wise women and family life marriage is the first item on the list that is described. A strong marriage is indeed essential and foundational for successful family life. One of the problems that our society has is the weakening and redefinition of marriage. But it is also an opportunity for us who are Christians to show a watching culture what marriage and family can be as we display Biblical marriage in action.

III.

Most of the passage is devoted to the second characteristic of the wise woman. In vv. 13-19 and 21-24 we find that THE WISE WOMAN IS AN INDUSTRIOUS HOMEMAKER. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE WISE WOMAN IS...) Verse 13 says, **“She seeks wool and flax,/ and works with willing hands.”** Much of domestic life is routine and mundane. But the wise woman is committed to it.

This woman is involved in working with wool and flax. Most of us, I suspect, know a little about wool, perhaps less about flax. (FLAX) It is a plant that looks like this. It is soaked and dried and processed to make linen. (FLAX TO LINEN)

Verse 14: **“She is like the ships of the merchant;/ she brings her food from afar.”** If she has cloth that she has sold, she can afford to buy more expensive food from the market, food that is imported. (PROJECTOR OFF) Or perhaps she is able to go to a more distant market that has the food that she seeks.

Verse 15: **“She rises while it is yet night/ and provides food for her household/ and portions for her maidens.”** This woman is industrious. She is focused on serving her family. She is not self-centered, not focused on finding self-fulfillment. At the same time it is clear that she has additional help around the house. But she does not lay around and let these other women serve her.

According to v. 16, **“She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.”** She was a businesswoman like Cherry who got involved in real estate.

This wise woman of v. 16 perhaps used money set aside from her flax and wool business to purchase this plot of land. She did not simply tell the household help to then prepare the land for grapevines. She got directly involved herself. Literally the text says, **“with the fruit of her palms she plants a vineyard.”**

Verse 17 says, **“She dresses herself with strength/ and makes her arms strong.”** This is a different word for “strength” than *chayil*. But it is clear that this woman is a physically active lady.

Verse 18: **“She perceives that her merchandise is profitable./ Her lamp does not go out at night.”** This woman produces and sells wool and linen cloth or clothes, and she has grapes or wine from her vineyards. If she was Baptist, it certainly would have been grape juice.

The second line could mean that she works at night. But we have already seen that she gets up in the morning when it is still dark. The poor gal has to get some sleep. So I am more inclined to think that this means that she had plenty of financial resources that she could afford to have oil around to burn a lamp all night. Having a lamp burn all night was the sign of a prosperous, well-ordered household.

According to v. 19, **“She puts her hands to the distaff,/ and her hands hold the spindle.”** (PROJECTOR ON--- DISTAFF) The distaff and spindle were used to make yarn or thread from wool and flax. The wool or flax was put on the distaff, and then it was wound into threads on the spindle. This wise woman was again directly involved in a domestic craft to produce cloth and/or clothes.

Skipping down to v. 21 (PROJECTOR OFF) we learn, **“She is not afraid of snow for her household,/ for all her household are clothed in scarlet.”** We find in v. 30 that this woman’s only fear is a respectful reverence of God.

Perhaps the clothes identified here are the product of her own home business. The original word for “scarlet” is uncertain. If it means “scarlet,” then the idea is that these are fancy clothes. For scarlet clothes required a dye that was very expensive. The other possibility is that the word means something like “double thickness.” The idea then would be that this family had warm clothes that would be sufficient for snowy weather, which usually happened only about every other year in Jerusalem.

Verse 22: **“She makes bed coverings for herself;/ her clothing is fine linen and purple.”** Fine linen and purple clothing were usually imported. They were expensive. So this gal does dress herself well.

Verse 23: **“Her husband is known in the gates/ when he sits among the elders of the land.”** The gates of the city was the place where business transactions were conducted and where legal matters were addressed. The elders of the city were the members of what we would call today the city council.

But notice that this husband sits not just with the local leaders but with the elders of the land. So his influence and authority extend beyond local government. The implication is that his wife has something to do with this high position. She directs and oversees

matters at home, and she provides family income, such that her husband has the time and opportunity to have influence in the larger community and even nation.

Finally in v. 24 we read, **“She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.”** Here we learn that this wise woman does indeed produce clothes and sells them. She uses the money to buy land for a vineyard. She buys good groceries and imported clothing that is more expensive in order to provide for her family. Such is the work of the industrious homemaker.

IV.

In v. 20 we find that the wise woman is not only an excellent wife and industrious homemaker. THE WISE WOMAN IS also A KIND NEIGHBOR. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE WISE WOMAN IS...) **“She opens her hand to the poor/ and reaches out her hands to the needy.”** This wise woman understands her Biblical responsibility to love one’s neighbor. Because she is industrious and a woman of *chayil*, she has extra resources to help the needy. Literally it says that she opens her palms to them. This may mean that she gives them food or clothing or a place to stay. Her care and concern extends beyond her family to the wider community.

V.

Then in vv. 25 & 26 we find out that THE WISE WOMAN IS A CONFIDENT TEACHER. (V. THE WISE WOMAN IS...) **“Strength and dignity are her clothing,/ and she laughs at the time to come./ She opens her mouth with wisdom,/ and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”** Personal character and experience is always the best basis for teaching. In the context of the Proverbs it is especially important for the teaching of wisdom.

Laughing at someone is often used in ancient literature in a context of military action against enemies. Here the potential enemy is the trials and calamities and weather events that the future may bring.

This strong woman, this woman of *chayil*, also knows about kindness--- about loyal love, and she teaches it. That teaching is informed by the wisdom of Proverbs. In Proverbs #1 v. 8 (PROVERBS 1:8) we read, **“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction,/ and forsake not your mother’s teaching...”** Children need teaching from both parents. The mom in our passage is a confident teacher.

VI.

We also learn from vv. 27-29 that THE WISE WOMAN IS AN APPRECIATED MOTHER. (VI. THE WISE WOMAN IS...) According to v. 27, **“She looks well to the ways of her household/ and does not eat the bread of idleness.”** One commentator describes her as “a lookout post.” (Tremper Longman, *Proverbs*) This verse is a kind of summary of her industrious homemaking. The Proverbs speak often about the problems of the sluggard. This woman is far from that. She is a hard working woman. Her work is strategically done with the welfare of her family in view.

Verse 28 says, **“Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her...”** As the years go by, hubby and the kids grow in their appreciation of the contributions of the wise woman. Perhaps reference to the kids includes more than one generation. It is important that these people in the woman’s life express that praise.

I think of the 100th birthday party that Ralph and Marilyn hosted for her mother several years ago. There were, I believe, five generations represented there. All of them have been touched by a godly matriarch’s example and teaching and spiritual legacy. What a great opportunity for those of us who were able to attend to celebrate and honor a wise mother.

Verse 29 describes the content of the praise of a wise woman: **“Many women have done excellently--- *chayil*, but you surpass them all.”** Such is the appreciation that should be expressed toward the wise woman. Such is the reason for the occasion of Mothers’ Day.

VII.

Finally, in vv. 30 & 31 we find that THE WISE WOMAN IS A GODLY SAINT. (VII. THE WISE WOMAN IS...) **“Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,/ but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised./ Give her of the fruit of her hands,/ and let her works praise her in the gates.”** Men are often attracted to charm and beauty. Charm promises happiness, but it doesn’t deliver in the long run. Beauty is nice. But it is fleeting. It is character that counts.

The foundation of a wise woman is fear of the Lord, which involves living according to the wisdom principles of Proverbs. In Proverbs #9 v. 10 (PROVERBS 9:10) we read, **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom...”** This ideal woman fears the Lord. What she has produced by the labor of her hands testifies to her wisdom. The fruits of her labor include not only textiles and clothes and vineyards but a contented husband and children who turn out well and who acknowledge her success.

Fred Barnes has been a journalist and the executive editor of *The Weekly Standard* and a Fox News contributor. He once described the wise woman who was his mother: **“My mother, Rosa Miller Barnes, was the Billy Graham of our family. With my dad’s help, she converted all of us to orthodox Christianity. Her approach was not to deliver a sermon or drag everyone off to church or insist we read a religious book or tract. It wasn’t that she was shy about discussing her faith. She could explain with great clarity what being a follower of Jesus Christ meant in her life. But she never pushed her faith on anyone. If she found someone wasn’t receptive, she changed the subject to one of mutual interest. She was never judgmental. She was always patient.**

**“We fell like dominos, first my sister, Rosa, and her husband... then their two kids... Next was my daughter Karen, who became a Christian at age 9. My mother was subtle. She sent Karen to vacation Bible school when she visited her grandparents in the summer, and she took Karen to church. After two years of**

**this, she gently asked Karen if she'd like to accept Christ as her savior. Karen said yes. My wife, Barbara, and I and our three other children took the plunge several years later. But that's not the end of it. My sister and her husband went into full-time ministry... Their children became preachers as well. My kids would bring their friends along to Christian youth group meetings, where they were converted. My mother was the cause of all of this. The ripple effects of her life were extraordinary. Her legacy will be felt forever.**

**"She had a very simple evangelical tool. It was the way she lived her life. There's an old Christian rule of thumb about the priorities of life. God is first, others are second, I'm third. My mother exemplified the 'I'm third' approach. It was difficult to get her to talk about herself. When she was forced to, she'd switch subjects as quickly as possible, usually by asking the person she was talking to about his or her life. This invariably worked, even with family members.**

**"She never complained, except jokingly about the bruises that showed up on her legs as a result of blood thinning medicine. She grew up an Army brat. Her father and brother and the man she married were West Pointers. When I decided against West Point, she was upset, but she never told me so. Sons seek the approval of their father, but they want their mother to be a cheerleader. My mother was a cheerleader for me and for many of my friends.**

**"For almost two decades, my mother and father worked in lay ministry. One at a time, they'd collect at their house people beset with pain, trouble, sorrow, or all three. My parents offered counsel, prayer, healing, and friendship, and often a bed to sleep in. When my family visited, we'd encounter strangers who'd drop in any time, day or night, to see my parents, especially my mother. One of her skills was to be a sympathetic listener. Rather than dispensing advice, she offered encouragement while discreetly steering them toward faith in Christ.**

**"I was lucky to be her son. We were interested in the same subjects except for one. She didn't care about sports. But she loved to talk about her faith, her family, and politics. She followed politics closely...**

**"My mother never wanted to impose. When she and I would talk on the phone, she'd have written a list of things she wanted to ask about. That way she felt the conversation would be organized and wouldn't take up too much of my time. After my wife and I bought a house near her in Vero Beach, Florida, in 2001, she would drop by nearly every day for a visit. The moment she walked in the door, she'd announce, 'I can't stay.' Sure enough, after 30 minutes she'd get up and leave. I wasn't there for her last visit. She came by to have lunch with Karen and my sister. As she walked to her car afterwards, one of her legs gave out and she fell. An ambulance was called. As it drove away, she lifted her head from the stretcher, waved, and said, 'Thanks. I had a wonderful time.' She died the next day, three months short of her 90th birthday." (*Washington Examiner*, 6/13/2005)**



This woman exhibited many of the characteristics of the wise woman described in our passage. May her tribe increase. May the women among us grow in wisdom. May we men appreciate the wisdom of the women in our lives. May we all demonstrate the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.