

Proverbs 31 – Laying Groundwork for the Future

Throughout the book of Proverbs, we've learned the effects of walking in God's wisdom. In the final chapter of the book, we're given a portrait of a person who chooses that path as a lifestyle. The woman described is fierce caring for her family, caring for the poor, working outside the home, buying property, cultivating the land, and more. She is strong, discerning, committed, and caring. Her example might seem out of reach, but the essence of it all is that she daily chooses to walk with God in His wisdom. In the end, other people can't help but recognize the legacy of godly wisdom she leaves, and celebrate that legacy. What a blessing it would be for others to see all the ways that Jesus works in and through us. This isn't to earn spiritual "brownie points," take the credit for what the Spirit does, or even for the sake of attaining some measure of earthly legacy, in and of itself. But it does remind us that our lives are meant to be multiplied. Whether we have children of our own or we raise and invest in the spiritual family that God provides, we are meant to multiply our lives in the next generation.

To do that, we need wisdom that we don't possess in our flesh. We need the Lord to give us words of wisdom in our conversations. We need Him to transform our thoughts and attitudes. We need Him to move us and motivate us for His kingdom work-work that starts in our own homes. Those things are only possible when we are anchored in God's Word and obedient to His Spirit within us.

We are laying spiritual groundwork for the future in the ways that we choose to walk in God's wisdom today. This is where our legacies are forged. As we seek God's everlasting wisdom for everyday life, we leave a legacy that far outlives us.

Sayings of King Lemuel

¹ The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him.

The words of King Lemuel: As with Agur in [Proverbs 30](#), we don't know anything about King Lemuel. He is not in any recorded list of the kings of Judah or Israel, so he was probably a pagan king who put his trust in Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, and through the fear of the LORD learned wisdom. The name Lemuel means, belonging to God.

The utterance: Like Solomon ([Proverbs 2:6](#)) and Agur ([Proverbs 30:1](#)), Lemuel understood that his words were an utterance, a prophecy or revelation, from God. Perhaps like Timothy ([2 Timothy 1:5](#)) Lemuel had a Jewish mother who taught him the fear of the LORD and God's wisdom.

² Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb! Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers! ³ Do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings.

My son: King Lemuel's mother spoke to him with great tenderness, describing her connection with him in three ways. He was her son; but then also the son of her womb, having given birth to him, and finally, he was the son of her vows; her promises and commitments. There is an ocean of love in a parent's heart, a fathomless depth of desire after the child's welfare, in the mother especially.

She traces his close connection to her backward from the present, to his gestation in her womb and to her vows before pregnancy. The latter statement probably refers to a vow she made that, that if God gave her a son she would dedicate him to live according to God's wisdom (cf. [1 Samuel 1:11](#)).

Do not give your strength to women: The sense is that an excessive sexual interest in women wastes a man's strength. This speaks of an unhealthy obsession with romance or sex, which have a proper place in life, but should not be made into a reason for living. The practice of sexual immorality and sex obsession gives away a man's strength, in the sense of his spiritual strength, his self-respect, his self-control, his example and standing in the community.

Of course, it could also be rightly said that in sexual immorality and sex obsession a woman gives away her strength as well, but King Lemuel's mother spoke this to her son, not directly to her daughter. Both men and women need to remain faithful to God in regard to sex and romance.

Nor your ways to that which destroys kings: Connected with the previous line, it seems that Lemuel's mother warned him, and us all, against sexual and romantic obsession, something so powerful it destroys kings – even the greatest kings. King Solomon himself was destroyed as he gave his strength to women ([1 Kings 11:1-10](#)). Solomon's father, King David, suffered tragically when he gave his strength to women ([2 Samuel 11-12](#)). David's lust for Bathsheba made him callous toward justice and cost Uriah his life, and Solomon's many sexual partners made him callous toward pure and undefiled religion and incapable of real love.

⁴ It is not for kings, Lemuel— it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, ⁵ lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. ⁶ Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! ⁷ Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.

It is not for kings to drink wine: Kings and those who lead should avoid alcohol. This idea is repeated three times for emphasis. Though the Bible does see a potential blessing in wine ([Psalm 104:15](#), [Proverbs 3:10](#)), it is a dangerous blessing that must be carefully regarded and for many, voluntarily set aside. See [Ecclesiastes 10:16-17](#).

Lest they drink and forget the law: The responsibilities of a king are so great that it is essential that he not be impaired in his judgment or abilities in any way. This principle is true not only for kings, but for leaders of many types, including and especially those who consider themselves leaders among God's people today.

Pervert the justice of all the afflicted: Which may easily be done by a drunken judge, because drunkenness deprives a man of the use of reason; by which men can distinguish between right and wrong.

Give strong drink to him who is perishing: King Lemuel's mother thought of two more appropriate drinkers rather than the king. First, she thought of the condemned criminal who needs to be numbed by strong drink on his way to execution. Second, she thought of those who are bitter of heart, who could drink and forget his poverty and his misery. It isn't that there are no consequences for drinking in these two cases, but that the consequences have little impact in comparison to the king or leader.

⁸ Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. ⁹ Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Open your mouth for the speechless: The idea is that there are those who can't speak for themselves, to defend themselves in a court of law or in less formal circumstances. The wise and godly man or woman will speak for the speechless, and take up the cause of the defenseless. As a unit, [Proverbs 31:1-9](#) raises an important question. Being a leader means some level of position and power. Will you use it to indulge yourself (here the indulgence is women and wine, [Proverbs 31:3-7](#)), or will you use your position and power to protect and benefit those you lead (as in [Proverbs 31:8-9](#))?

Open your mouth, judge righteously: This was especially important for a king like Lemuel, but applies to everyone. If we have the opportunity to right a wrong or see that a wrong is punished, we should speak up (open your mouth) and judge righteously. We should plead the cause of the poor and needy who have trouble properly defending themselves.

It is noteworthy that this is her sole political concern; she does not say anything about building up the treasury, creating monuments to his reign, or establishing a dominant military power. For her the king's throne is truly founded on righteousness.

Epilogue: The Wife of Noble Character

¹⁰ A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

Who can find a virtuous wife? In this last section of Proverbs 31, Lemuel's mother spoke to him about the qualities of a virtuous wife. The following verses speak of her character and activity, giving Lemuel an idea of the woman to search for and to prize. This passage is traditionally understood as being addressed to women but is more accurately spoken by a woman to a man so he could know the character and potential character of a good wife before marriage, and value and praise his wife for her virtuous character once married. It is primarily a search-list for a man, and only secondarily a checklist for a woman.

This passage describes the kind of wife the Christian man should pray for and seek after. This passage reminds the Christian man that he must walk in the fear and wisdom of God so that he will be worthy of and compatible with such a virtuous woman.

Her worth is far above rubies: Precious gems like rubies are both valued and rare. In a sense, the complete profile of the "[Proverbs 31 Woman](#)" is an ideal goal, much as the listing of the character of the godly man for leadership in both [1 Timothy 3](#) and [Titus 1](#). It would be rare to find a woman who excels in every aspect of the list.

¹¹ Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. ¹² She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

The heart of her husband safely trusts her: The virtuous wife not only has the trust of her husband, but it is safely given to her. Her character is trustworthy, filled with integrity. She will speak, act, and live with wisdom – and therefore God's blessing will be on their home. A foolish woman, who can't be trusted, takes some measure of blessing away from the home, and this is often seen financially or materially.

There is hardly any trait more beautiful than this—absolute trustworthiness...he seeks her confidence and advice. He has no fear of her betraying his secrets. He can safely trust her. He is confident of her love, care, and fidelity. He dares to trust her with his soul secrets, etc.; he doubt not of her chastity, secrecy, or care to keep his family.

He will have no lack of gain: Some think a wife is a burden or hindrance to gain and a better life. This is not so in God's plan and with the presence and influence of a virtuous wife. She brings gain to her husband on many levels, and in great measure.

She does him good and not evil: Several previous proverbs explained the bad effect of a bad wife. The opposite is also true; a virtuous wife does her husband good and not evil, and she continues being a blessing all the days of her life. The sense is that her goodness and faithful character becomes deeper and greater through the passing years.

¹³ She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. ¹⁴ She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. ¹⁵ She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants. ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

She seeks wool and flax: Using wonderful poetic images, King Lemuel's mother described life-like examples of the busy, hard-working, and creative character of the virtuous wife. A woman who felt

burdened to complete each of these tasks in a day, week, or even month would be exhausted and probably discouraged. Yet the character poetically described can be evident in a wise and godly woman's life in its own way.

The flurry of activity doesn't mean that she does all these things in a day or even a week, but it does point to how much work and how many different kinds of work are involved in wisely and properly managing a home. Women today can take comfort and confidence in God's recognition here of just how big their job is.

She seeks wool and flax: The virtuous woman knows how to seek and find things that are necessary resources for her family and home. **Willingly works with her hands:** The virtuous wife is not proud and does not think that working with her hands is beneath her. She works in simple and practical ways for her family and home. What sets this virtuous wife apart is that she willingly works.

She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar: The virtuous wife provides food for her family and home after the pattern of a **merchant ship**, which operates with regularity and effort. If required, she even rises while it is still dark to either get or prepare food for her household.

And a portion for her maidservants: It wasn't uncommon for many families in Biblical times to have servants or hired workers. The virtuous wife wisely manages and cares for such maidservants, showing her compassion and care even beyond her immediate family.

She considers a field and buys it: The virtuous wife is forward thinking, combining her creativity with hard work. She thoughtfully (considers) invests and uses the profits to better her family and their future, in this case by planting a vineyard.

¹⁷ She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. ¹⁸ She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. ¹⁹ In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. ²⁰ She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

She girds herself with strength: The virtuous wife is noted for her strength, and it is strength in action (her arms). She uses her strength for productive purpose. She takes care of her own health and strength, not only by means of useful labor, but by healthy exercise. She avoids what might exhaust her body, or soften her mind-she is ever active.

She perceives that her merchandise is good: She is wise and experienced enough to get good materials and merchandise for her home. Her wisdom teaches her to buy oil for her lamp, of such quality that it burns through the night and does not go out.

She takes care to manufacture the best articles of the kind, and to lay on a reasonable price that she may secure a ready sale. Her goods are in high demand, and she knows she can sell as much as she can make. And she finds that while she pleases her customers, she increases her own profits.

She stretches out her hands to the distaff: The virtuous wife knows how to use the tools and technology available to manage the home well. The distaff is a stick or spindle onto which wool or flax is wound for spinning, and she uses both hands to do the work well. Sarah ([Genesis 18:6-8](#)), Rebekah ([Genesis 24:18-20](#)) and Rachel ([Genesis 29:9, 10](#)) show that women of high social rank and wealth were not above manual, even menial, labor.

She extends her hand to the poor: The virtuous wife is much more than a skillful manager or homemaker; she is also a woman of great compassion. She cares for and helps both the poor and the

needy, doing more than throwing money to them, but she actually draws near to them and extends her hand and reaches out to those in need.

²¹ When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. ²² She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. ²³ Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

She is not afraid of snow for her household: The virtuous wife has the wisdom, diligence, and preparation to ready her household for all kinds of challenges and adversity. Her fear of the LORD, and the wisdom that flows from it, invites God's blessing, even being able to clothe all her household in prestigious scarlet. She provides enough, for their necessity and defense against cold and other inconveniences.

Her household is clothed in scarlet: Some wonder why scarlet clothing would be connected to the fact that she is not afraid of snow for her household. It has been suggested that the scarlet color of the clothing makes her children easy to find in heavy snow, but given the relatively light snowfall in that part of the world, this is unlikely. It is possible that this does not describe a color, but doubly thick garments.

She makes a tapestry for herself: With God's blessing on her wisdom and diligence, the virtuous wife makes good things for herself and enjoys personal marks of God's material blessing on her family. To produce this red dye was costly because it comes from a seashell off the Phoenician coast and so connotes wealth and luxury.

Her husband is known in the gates: The virtuous wife sees such a blessing on her family and household that her husband is also esteemed and honored among the elders of the land. All this is the blessing of God that often comes to the wife who walks in virtue, wisdom, and the fear of the LORD.

She is a loving wife, and feels for the respectability and honor of her husband.... He is respected not only on account of the neatness and cleanliness of his person and dress, but because he is the husband of a woman who is justly held in universal esteem. And her complete management of household affairs gives him full leisure to devote himself to the civil interests of the community.

²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. ²⁵ She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

She makes linen garments and sells them: The wisdom and diligence of the virtuous wife leads her to not only provide the necessities for her family, but she makes enough and of such great quality that she sells those necessities to the sellers (the merchants). She cares deeply for her family, but her mind and vision go beyond them to the outside world where she does good for herself and her family.

Strength and honor are her clothing: The fact that she is willing to distribute and sell linen garments she makes, and has, shows that her first priority isn't in what is in her closet or what she wears. She cares even more about the display of her character than the outward display of her clothing. When it comes to character, she is one of the best dressed, clothed with strength and honor, so that she shall rejoice not only in the present day, but also in time to come. The praise of the woman can hardly be higher: it attributes to her the advantages of both youth and old age.

²⁶ She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. ²⁷ She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

She opens her mouth with wisdom: The description of her inner life continues from the previous verse. The virtuous wife has what is often described and valued in the Book of Proverbs – wise speech and words that show the law of kindness. Both her deliberate speech (she opens her mouth) and her

spontaneous words (on her tongue) are marked by wisdom and kindness. She is neither sullenly silent, nor full of vain and disrespectful talk.

She watches over the ways of her household: As a faithful guardian, the virtuous wife is observant of her family and their ways. The choice to watch so carefully means that she does not choose to eat the bread of idleness. She hath an oar in every boat, an eye in every business; she spies and pries into her children's and servants' carriages, and requires strict conversation and growth in godliness: she overlooks the whole family as if she were in a watch tower.

²⁸ Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ²⁹ "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."

Her children rise up and call her blessed: A woman of such character and wisdom rightfully receives the blessings and praises of her family. Both her children and her husband not only see, but also speak of the blessedness of the woman who brings such blessing to their household. This is not only a description of the virtuous wife, but also an exhortation to children and a husband to bless and praise the mother and wife of godly character.

Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all: These are the words of the husband as he praises his wife, with words that encourage, reward, and nourish her. In a completely literal sense, this could only be true of one woman in any given community at any given time. Yet, we perfectly understand the sense of this. Every home can have a wife and mother that does excel them all; every husband can legitimately feel "I've got the best wife" and children feel, "We have the best mom."

³⁰ Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. ³¹ Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing: King Lemuel's mother noted the passing nature of outer beauty and the deceitful nature of manipulative charm. In contrast, a woman who fears the LORD has beauty that does not pass and charm that does not deceive. Charm is deceitful because it gives a false representation of the person, and often covers a deformed soul with many evil and hateful qualities. Physical appearance is not necessarily dismissed—it simply does not endure as do those qualities that the fear of the Lord produces...one who pursues beauty may very well be disappointed by the character of the 'beautiful' person.

A woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised: Proverbs begins with a strong connection between wisdom and the fear of the LORD ([Proverbs 1:7](#)). Here the collection ends describing the virtuous wife as filled with the wisdom, beauty, and charm that marks a woman who fears the LORD.

The fact that she truly fears the LORD shows that she had a real relationship with Him. She was not only a Martha, busy with service; she was also Mary, walking in fear and reverence toward the LORD. She lives according to the wisdom revealed in this book. Coming at the end of the poem, and of the book, this pinpoints the organizing factor in this brilliant woman's universe. It is her fear of Yahweh that enables her to see that real greatness will come to her, not through self-centered aggressiveness, and not through merely external beauty, but through godly devotion and the wholehearted commitment to God's creational intention for her.

Give her the fruit of her hands: This virtuous woman will be rewarded by the God she fears and rewarded by what she has accomplished for her family and herself, as they publicly speak of her godliness and wisdom. For the woman (and man) of wisdom, this reward is not their primary motivation, but the fitting result of their life lived in fear of the LORD.