

A Virtuous Woman/Person

Proverbs 31:10-31

- ¹⁰ A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
- 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.
- ¹³ She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
- ¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.
- ¹⁵ She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls.
- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
- ¹⁷ She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.
- ¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.
- ¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
- ²⁰ She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.
- ²¹ She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson.
- ²² She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
- ²³ Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.
- ²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.
- ²⁵ Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
- ²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
- ²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- ²⁸ Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, 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 a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.

Commentator H. James Hopkins tells that in the church of his youth, a church that did not follow the liturgical calendar and paid no attention to the lectionary, Proverbs 31:10-31 was the Scripture of choice on Mother's Day. "A mother's work is hard," they were told as their pastor interpreted the Scripture. "The work God has given to mothers needs to be respected by all, as it is respected in the Scripture," they were informed. "Those of you who are godly mothers deserve our praise," ran the sermon. "Those of us who were raised, those of us who are being raised, by mothers who labor long and hard on our behalf need to thank God and thank those women," they were reminded.

While Psalms 23 is the most frequently chosen Old Testament passage for memorial services, Proverbs 31 is often chosen as well, particularly when the deceased is a woman, a grandmother, a mother, or a wife. Yet, like Psalms 23, this is a text for the living, and it should not be confined to memorial services or eulogies.

The writer of Proverbs speaks of the qualities of a capable wife, literally a woman "of strength." In Proverbs wisdom is personified in a woman of integrity, energy, industry, creativity, and compassion. **Kenneth H. Carter Jr.**

Proverbs 31:10-31 is an acrostic poem, arranged in alphabetical order, each line beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The presence of the acrostic, combined with language repeated from earlier poems about personified wisdom, suggests that this woman is more than the average mortal. In the book's introduction (Prov. 1-9), Wisdom Woman calls out to the "simple." The "simple" refers to anyone who is not yet wise, that is, to everyone. She urges her listeners to obey her commands, to eat at her feast, and to choose her instead of the Stranger

Woman, also known as Dame Folly. The book sets forth the choice between these two women, as if its readers were selecting a life partner. The way of wisdom requires that much commitment. To choose Wisdom Woman is to choose life and the husband is a stand-in for all her followers. **Kathleen M. O'connor**

An embodiment of wisdom, this wife's example has inspired women and men for generations. She rises early (v. 15), not because of her subordination but because of her determination. She helps her husband, not because he holds power over her but because her character is trustworthy and her work fruitful (vv. 11-12). Her business flourishes because of her initiative and creativity (vv. 13-14, 16). Her generosity is not coerced but reflects her kind heart for needy strangers (v. 20) as well as her own children (v. 21). She is energetic and strong because of her self-discipline (vv. 17-19). She is not an appendage or bondservant of her spouse but a true partner. Indeed, in a world tempted to acknowledge only a woman's charm and beauty as her own (v. 30) and grant only her husband public recognition and control over the family name and resources, her goodness compels all to respect and reward her (vv. 28-31). In all these ways and more, her virtue shines and impresses the fear of the Lord upon all who know her, regardless of their stations in life. Along with Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, and many others, she is a type for the suffering Son of Man, servant of all, whose wise love overthrows the foolish tyranny of sin (Mark 9:30-37). **Telford Work**

This passage of Scripture contains both bad news and good news. This is a word that cuts two different ways, and it can be heard as judgment or affirmation. For many women who read this proverb, it seems like an overwhelming ideal, an impossible job description, almost a portrayal of a spiritual Martha Stewart: make your own clothes; get up in the middle of the night to get everyone else going; take care of the family business; work into the night; and, oh yes, have something to give to those in need; always be strong and dignified, and have something

profound to say; but also laugh a little; and, finally, do not take yourself so seriously. Your children will affirm you, your husband will appreciate you. And do all of this with a reverence for God.

Many of us women hear all of this and react with nervous laughter, or our response may be one of resistance, as if to say, "*That is not me.*" This proverb can be read as a confirmation of our culture's pressure to overfunction.

Yet there is also good news here. How a story (or a biblical book) concludes is never accidental, and it is significant that the Proverbs find their consummation in these words about wisdom. Embedded in these words are the values that sustain our lives, our minds, our bodies, our souls: trust and integrity in personal relationships, sacrifice, going the extra mile, providing for our children, opening our hands to the poor, doing whatever needs to be done—and yet doing it with a sense of humor, because, really, what is the alternative? We all know from experience that these are patterns of life found in the women and men who sustain our congregation.

Wisdom may be defined as a life well lived, a life that matters. Wisdom in the Bible is not enlightenment. Rather, wisdom is a lifetime of obedience to God, discipline honed in daily decisions. Wisdom in the Bible is never mere knowledge. In our culture, knowledge is a form of control, exercised for the benefit of the one in possession of learning acquired through privilege and maintained through credentialing. In Scripture, wisdom is a way of life that includes justice, righteousness, humility, compassion, and fairness.

How do we discover this wisdom? We see wisdom in other people, and as we consider this text, we reflect on the women and men of faith across our spiritual journeys, sensing how they are often used by God to teach us about wisdom. We think of Paul's letter to Timothy, with its remembrance of how Timothy's grandmother and mother took part in his spiritual formation (2 Tim. 1:5).

As a pastor, I often have the honor of sitting with families of adult children when stories are shared about wisdom, about mothers (and fathers) whose activities do resemble the portrayal in Proverbs 31: a mother or father who encourages their daughter to finish college; a mother and father who leave the comfort of their retirement community to help their daughter, a single mother and widow, in the raising of children; a mother or father who works the third shift in order to be present for children as they rise in the morning and as they return from school. Of course there are many women and men of wisdom who do not have biological children, and yet shape and form the lives of others. Commentator Kenneth H. Carter, tells that in his first pastorate, situated in a rural community with strong multigenerational families, he and his wife were blessed to know two women who adopted their youngest daughter as their own.

These experiences remind us of so many mothers, fathers, people of faith, who we have met in the life of the church, who have taught us wisdom for living. We remember those who give us life, acknowledging their sacrifices and standing amazed in the presence of those who hold everything together, embodying the ties that bind us. Surely at the heart of all of this is wisdom. At the beginning of Proverbs we read, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7). And at the conclusion of the book we read these words: "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (31:30).

The reverence in this proverb is not for women. Women do not need to be placed on pedestals. The expectations there are exhausting, and the fall from grace is destructive. The reverence, the fear of the Lord, is for God. This is the beginning, or the better part of wisdom.

Wisdom is a quality that has less to do with charm or beauty, or whatever the current social constructions of charm or beauty are, and more to do with what the writer calls "fear of the LORD," which is the place that we all stand before God.

This is surely good news for women and men who seek after wisdom. **Kenneth H. Carter Jr.**

This text is a precious gift to males and females, singles and spouses, feminists and patriarchalists and egalitarians. This text presses us to think about partnerships between men and women in the work of the community. It presses us to consider the value of these partnerships; it presses us to ponder their lack. Indeed, this text is helpfully interpreted not as an eloquent hymn to a solitary individual, but as a person who is interdependence, in partnership, and in community.

A hymn that comes to mind when hearing this text is "Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service." This hymn concludes with these words: "Called by worship to your service, forth in your dear name we go to the child, the youth, the aged, love in living deeds to show; hope and health, goodwill and comfort, counsel, aid and peace we give, that your servants, Lord, in freedom may your mercy know, and live." Like the text, the hymn points us not to solitary labor, not to women's work or men's work, but to needed work that is best accomplished together, work that expresses wisdom, faith, hope, and love in ways that build people up and bring people together. **H. James Hopkins**

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