

Wonderful Women • Proverbs 31:10-31

Mother's Day is often a celebration of nostalgia. We think back to the good old days when life was simpler and stresses on the family were not as great as they are today. We may long for the time when families tended to stay put and there were more two-parent homes, fewer moms working outside the home and standards were pretty clear-cut as to right or wrong.

In many ways much has changed, but in many ways things are not as different as we may imagine them to be. Extensive research has been done comparing the way family life is today with the way it was before the birth of our country in colonial days. For example, the extended family never has really existed on a wide scale. Data from colonial America show that only 6% of US households contained children, parents and grandparents. Today, that figure is about the same. In colonial days 70% of families had two parents. Today 84% of families have two parents. What divorce is doing to break-up modern families, death did in earlier times. The divorce rate has gone up as the death rate has gone down. Researchers claim that American families move no more today than they did back in the 19th century. Research shows that in days when there were not the labor saving devices we have today and when women had many more tasks to do at home and still had to work in the fields on the farm, in all probability they had less time to spend with their children than mothers who work outside the home have to spend with their children today.

The differences are not so much the times in which we live but the people who live in any era. Every generation has its righteous women and its rotten women. Every generation has its wonderful wives and its worthless wives. Every generation has its marvelous mothers and its miserable mothers.

The sages of Proverbs clearly understood these timeless contrasts. Let's take a look at what is said as far as wives are concerned. In Proverbs 18:22 we are told, "He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord." This is a marvelous description of the importance of a good wife. But three chapters later in Proverbs 21:9 we are told, "Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife." It makes you wonder if that may have been written from experience!

The contrast shows even more sharply in Proverbs 19:13 and 14 where two different types of wives are

compared one with the other. In Proverbs 19:13 we are told, ". . . a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping." There is an Arab proverb that is somewhat akin to this. It says: "Three things make a house intolerable: tac (the leaking through of rain); nac (a wife's nagging); and bac (bugs)." But verse 14 goes on to say, "Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord."

Today's need is not for women to return to another era. Today's need is the same as it has been for every era. It is the need for the right kind of women. And that is what is described in Proverbs 31:10-31.

Upon reading something like this there are often some typical female reactions to these proverbs. It may be the feeling of inadequacy: "I could never be like that. She is perfect and I'm so imperfect. Every time I hear that last chapter of Proverbs I feel like such a failure." Or it may be anger: "I'll tell you what. Let me trade this proverbial Wonder Woman's maids and money for my husband and kids. Then we will see what she is really made out of!"

Don't feel guilty and don't feel angry! Rather, take Proverbs 31 as a challenge to be the kind of woman God wants you to be and the kind of woman you can

be. Her characteristics are described throughout chapter 31. The important principle of this description is not in her specific actions but in her outstanding character. We totally miss the point if we dwell on her time for getting up, her real estate wisdom or the fact that she has maids working

for her. Instead, let's focus on the character of this wonderful woman.

According to verses 11 and 12 she is trustworthy. "Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life." This wonderful woman can always be trusted. There is no duplicity about her. She does not say one thing and then behave in another way. You can tell her anything and be sure she will never gossip. You can trust her to go anywhere anytime without ever worrying that she will be unfaithful. You can be completely confident that her word is sacred and will not be broken. There is never any doubt about her telling you the truth. Your life and reputation are always safe with her. She will always do you good, always speak well of you.

She is smart enough to know what needs to be done and strong enough to go ahead and do it.

If you are attacked behind your back she will come to your defense. You will always be better off and farther ahead because of her. And you need never worry that she might harm you in any way.

Imagine someone to whom you would trust your reputation among your enemies. She is that kind of person. Think of a person who would do you no injury or embarrassment if you were hypnotized at a party. She is the one. Imagine a person to whom you would trust your money with power of attorney. She is such a woman.

As if that is not enough, she is absolutely consistent. She does you good and not harm all the days of her life. Not just her good days. Not just when she likes the way you have treated her. Not just when she's in a good mood. She is absolutely trustworthy all the days of her life! In verses 13 to 19 and in verse 27 there is quite a description:

She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

This wonderful woman is not lazy. Her primary motivation is not her comfort. She works hard and is willing to take on every challenge as best she can. If that means getting up early when she feels like sleeping in, she gets up. If that means working with her hands when she would rather relax, she will get to work. If that means going outside to dig when it would be easier to stay inside and clean, she will go out and get her hands dirty.

Diligence characterizes her life. But that does not mean that she always succeeds. She is not the smartest person around. She is not a genius to whom everything comes easily. She gets sick just like everyone else. But, she diligently and faithfully does the very best she can.

That's not to say that she will always succeed. It does not mean that she is a genius and always has it made and everything always goes great. It is not saying that she never gets sick or has problems. But it is say-

ing that she will always work hard to do her very best. She always thinks of others. She will always give her best possible effort.

What a contrast she is to the woman who can always find an excuse, continually blames other people, does not like to work and who expects others to do everything for her!

Nor is she a workaholic. She doesn't work just for work's sake. She *considers* and she *sees*. She is smart enough to know what needs to be done and strong enough to go ahead and do it. She is trustworthy and she is diligent.

In verses 20 and 26 we see that she is compassionate. "*She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. . . . She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.*" Her diligence is not selfish. She is not just out for herself. She sees the needs of others even beyond her family. When she sees other people hurting or hungry or lonely, she does not protectively conserve what she has but delights that she can share her plenty with others. This marvelous woman thinks far more about the needs of the person she invites to dinner than about whether the house is neat and tidy.

When she speaks her words are kind even without her thinking about it. Because her heart is so sensitive to the needs and feelings of other people it is just plain unnatural for her to speak sharp words that cut down others. She is the kind of person you would go to if you had a need. Even if you had done something terribly wrong and even if there were nothing in her power to help you, you would go to her because you know that she would care, she would try to understand, she would forgive, she would listen and she would respond with love.

She is trustworthy. She is diligent. She is compassionate. But she is also strong. In Proverbs 31:25 we read, "*She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.*" Do not think that because she is compassionate and kind that she is weak! Far to the contrary, she is a woman of amazing inner strength. She has worked hard. She has been buffeted with life's experiences. But rather than being destroyed by them, she has been strengthened by them.

Imagine her in some ugly situation. Enemy soldiers occupy her town. They seek to publicly humiliate her. In fact, they bring her to the public square and tear off most of her clothes. They threaten her with death. She is amazing to behold because she will not allow them to take away her dignity, no matter what they do. She knows that they are accountable to God for their behavior and she will not allow them to steal her inner strength and dignity, no matter what they do on the out-

side. When they threaten her with awful things to come she can actually laugh because she knows that her future is committed to God. *“She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.”*

Let me tell you about a real-life woman who exemplifies so many of these characteristics. Her name was Helen Roseveare, an English physician and surgeon who went to the Belgian Congo as a medical missionary. She went through the revolution there that created the new nation of Zaire. She poured her life and skills into a nation that rewarded her with mistreatment, mistrust and eventual rape. She had her doubts and difficulties and failures, to be sure, but she was amazingly strong, returning to Africa as soon as she could get in. She spent twenty years developing a medical training school only to be unfairly accused by those whom she taught.

At her farewell from Africa, a mason named Nyelongo was among many who voluntarily stood to his feet to pay tribute to this marvelous woman. He told his story like this:

“You don’t remember, Doctor, but one day when we were building the main school block I was late for work. I was scared: roll-call was over and you had already gone into school. When you came out at eight o’clock you came straight over to me and asked how my baby was. I didn’t even know that you knew I had a baby!

“ ‘The baby is very sick,’ I told you.

“ ‘Where is the baby?’ you asked.

“ ‘Back at home.’

“ ‘But why not in the hospital? and you sounded irritated.

“ ‘We can’t afford the hospital card and care,’ I replied.

“Then you really were mad! You went straight up the hill to your home, got into your Land Rover, came charging down on to the building site and shouted to me to get in. I’d never been in a car before. You told me to direct you to our village, but no car had ever been to our village before. You didn’t seem to care, and we went, jolting and bumping over the mountainside. I called my wife and collected the baby, and you took us all to the hospital.”

I guess his child must have been very ill, as he said I told him not to return to work till

we saw whether his child would live. He probably missed three or four days’ work. He continued his story:

“At the end of the month, I came with the rest to be paid. I was trying to pluck up courage to ask you to spread my debt over several months, rather than take my whole month’s pay.

When you called my name, you passed me my wage-packet like everyone else. I just stared at you in unbelief. Then I rushed round the side of the house, laid the money out on the ground and counted it. It was all there.

“I ran all the way home. I called my wife. ‘Look, look, our money is all here. She hasn’t taken

any off, not even for the days’ work I missed, let alone for our baby’s care and treatment.’ ”

“We cried. Then we knelt down, and we suddenly realized all that you and Basuana meant when you told us day after day of God’s love: and we asked God then and there into our hearts and lives and have followed Him ever since.”

Not in ancient Israel when the book of Proverbs was written, but in modern Africa. Not a wife or mother but a single missionary. Helen Roseveare was one of a vast multitude of God’s women in different times, places and ways that have lived the characteristics of being trustworthy, diligent, compassionate and strong.

How could she and others do it? What is their secret? The secret is found in Proverbs 31:30: *“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”*

The Wonderful Woman of Proverbs 31 does not succumb to the trick of the world that externals are the secret of success. Charm means an attractive and alluring personality and manner. Beauty means physical comeliness, loveliness. At first impression, charm and beauty are what makes a woman magnificent. She stands out in the crowd. She captures your eye. You are attracted to her and fascinated by her. But God says that is really a deceitful trick because charm is only the external facade. There may not be anything deeper. And beauty is empty in that it can so easily fade with time and circumstances.

The Bible is not saying that a winsome personality and good looks are bad. To the contrary, they are wonderful gifts from the Lord. But, it is a terrible trick to

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think that charm and beauty are all important. We all know many stories of beautiful and enchanting women whose lives have been miserable and tragic because of mistaken priorities.

Imagine a woman who is good-looking and whose personality draws crowds but who, over the years, proves to be untrustworthy, lazy, unkind and weak. Before long her charm turns you off and her beauty is ignored.

The truth is that the highest virtues of womanhood can be achieved only through a fear of God—in other words, respectful obedience of the Lord. This woman has accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and acknowledged him as Lord. She lives with God as number one in her life. She is trustworthy because God has made her this way. She is diligent because she is serving her Lord. She is compassionate because the love of Jesus controls her heart. She is strong because the Holy Spirit gives her his strength.

The longer you know this woman the less you notice her physical appearance and the less her way with words seems to matter. Increasingly you describe her to others in terms of her godliness and character rather than in terms of age or height or color of hair.

The woman who knows and lives by this secret no longer depends on makeup or hairstyle or fashion to succeed in life. Her success comes from God and is far, far greater. The years cannot rob her of this inner beauty. Her beauty only increases and strengthens throughout her lifetime. The more you are with her the better you like her and the more you love her. She is a sharp contrast to her sister whose outer beauty wanes and exposes an inner ugliness.

Proverbs 31:28 tells us, *“Her children arise and call her blessed.”* They may not see her this way when they are children. Her trustworthiness may seem like inflexibility. Her diligence may look like lack of fun. Her compassion may be seen as weakness. Her strength may be called lack of love. And her fear of God may be called religious fanaticism. But when her children have risen up to maturity they will call her blessed and realize the wonderful woman their mother really is!

I remember times as a child when I thought I hated my mother and told her so. Now I cringe at the words I once spoke and marvel at her godly wisdom in taking it and hanging in there. Today I call her blessed.

In the end of verse 28 her husband also praises her. *“Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her!”* How incredibly fortunate is the man who has this kind of woman for his wife. As their years go by together he increasingly realizes that God has given to him a marvelous gift and that there are not adequate words to praise her.

Husbands, I do hope that you frequently and generously praise your wife! Your praise means far more to her than diamonds! Tell her often that you would rather have her as your wife than any other woman in the world. Thank her for her faithfulness, for her hard work, for her compassion and for her strength. Never let a single day go by without some kind of specific praise—whether a direct word, a phone call or a note. You will discover that your praise will make her beautiful!

In verse 31 we read, *“Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.”* *“The gates”* refers to the place of government and commerce in an ancient city. The woman who fears God and lives these characteristics will have a life and children and deeds that become known everywhere. Every one in the community will know by the results of her life what kind of woman she is.

But most important of all is not the praise of children or the praise of her husband or the praise of leaders in the community. The highest reward of all comes from the Lord himself who says in Proverbs 31:10, *“She is worth far more than rubies.”* God looks with delight on this wonderful woman. And the Lord says she is invaluable—more precious than the crown jewels of England. Here is a woman who exemplifies all that God calls good, who has her priorities straight, who lives for God and loves him. She is the crowning jewel of his creation!

Do you know what? You can be just that kind of wonderful woman. Young or old, single or married, with child or without. The challenge of God is to so live for him that your life is characterized by trustworthiness, by diligence, by compassion and by strength. The secret for that kind of a life is in fearing God and obeying him and putting him first. Then, may it be said of you, *“Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.”*

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