

In Praise of True Womanhood (Proverbs 31:10–31)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life
Zionsville Fellowship | April 26, 2026 | Drew Hunter

This morning we're in the last section of Proverbs.

We'll finish this morning, and then I'll give one final message on Proverbs next Sunday.

This morning we're looking at Proverbs 31—It's a poem in praise of true womanhood.

These are the two questions I think this text is leading us to ask and answer—one for women and one for men.

- For women: How do you view your value and vocation as a woman? In other words, what kind of life should be pursuing as a woman?
- And for men, how do you view the value and vocation of women? What kind of woman are you hoping to marry—or, if you are married, what should you value in your wife?

These are important questions today.

Our culture gives us competing visions of womanhood. The different waves of feminism give us different visions. Others give a nostalgic vision from the 1950s as ideal.

So, what should women be aiming at in life? What does true wisdom look like when it's embodied in their life *as a woman*? And what should young men be looking for in a future wife? Should it be physical beauty and wealth? Or something else?

Our text this morning gives us a portrait of wisdom embodied in a woman.

It gives us a vision of true femininity and true womanhood. It's a vision for women to receive and for men to honor.

We need to see the context of this text before we read it. This is the final and culminating chapter in the book of Proverbs. It's not just a tack-on appendix to the book.

We saw two weeks ago that this chapter gives a vision for true manhood and womanhood. It gives us the proverbs 31 man, and then the proverbs 31 woman. It shows us what wisdom looks like embodied in men and women.

Here's what we learned about true masculinity: It is exercising moral restraint for the sake of promoting justice, especially for the vulnerable.

Now here is true womanhood: **It is confident and joyful diligence for the sake of others—especially one's family and the vulnerable.**

Proverbs 31:10–31

10 An excellent 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 afar.
15 She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.
16 She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
17 She dresses 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 of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
22 She makes bed coverings for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
23 Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.
24 She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.
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 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.

Here's how this text portrays the embodiment of wisdom in a woman.

Confident and joyful diligence for the sake of others—especially one's family and the vulnerable... rooted in the fear of the Lord.

We'll walk through this text in four parts—we'll see who she is, how she serves her household, how she extends her influence, and why she is worthy of honor.

1. Who She Is (vv. 10–12)

First, who she is.

She is called in verse 10, “an excellent wife.” There are a number of ways this could be translated. It could be a noble woman. A valiant woman. Wife of noble character. This is a description of a woman who embodies the wisdom of Proverbs 1–30 in her life.

And this kind of woman is rare and she is valuable. Verse 10 asks, “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.”

And the next two verses show how valuable she is to her husband, in particular.

Verse 11 says, “The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.” She has proven faithfulness, honesty, and dependability.

There are almost no other places in the Bible that refer to trusting in people—only trusting in God.ⁱ And yet here she is so faithful that her husband can fully rely on her.

Trust assumes responsibility. Trust implies freedom. She is empowered and responsible. What can he trust her for? Verse 12 says, “She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.” The rest of the chapter will fill-out her responsibilities and competencies.

But before we consider the rest of this chapter, we have to ask this question:

Is this realistic? That's the real question people ask here. Is this a realistic vision of womanhood? Is this actually attainable?

We ask this because many women read Proverbs 31 and become discouraged. I read an article last week that argued that this chapter *is* unrealistic. And he argued that it is *not* actually advice on what a woman should be like. Instead, this is a personification of wisdom itself. So it's for people to learn about wisdom itself—like the character of Lady Wisdom in the beginning of the book. The author said that if we take this as an ideal for womanhood, women will be discouraged. It's not attainable.

So, is this a realistic vision of true womanhood?

On the one hand, this is not describing one specific person. This is an archetype. This is a poetic portrait of an idea woman. We can't see this in the English translations, but this section is an alphabetic acronym—which means that every verse starts with a different letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It's portraying a comprehensive, A-Z of an ideal woman.

But this ideal vision is meant to be pursued. The tone of this text is not to *pressure* people into conformity to all the details of this. This intended to be an inspirational vision of what wisdom looks like when it's embodied in a woman.

So, I agree with Kathleen Neilson, who said that there are all sorts of examples of this kind of life. She referred to obituaries of some woman, and how she learned how amazingly productive they were. In a sense this chapter reads like an obituary—it's not a snapshot in one moment of a life, but a lifetime achievement. But it's really possible, and many women do live this way by God's grace.

This is a picture of what womanhood looks like in Christ. Those who trust Christ receive two gifts: Forgiveness for all their failures, and also wisdom from the Holy Spirit. And this grace of forgiveness and wisdom from the Spirit change us. And lead us on the path to the truly wise and virtuous life.

And I see this lived out in many of you. God saved you by forgiving your sins, giving you new hearts, and transforming your lives. And you have lived with wisdom, and your life is worthy of honoring.

So, to answer our question: Who is the Proverbs 31 woman?

She is a poetic ideal of a virtuous woman's life in general. This is an example of embodied wisdom. And it's here for us to receive and honor when we see it.

Now, as we walk through the details—let's keep in mind who this applies to.

1. First, this is for young men to get a vision of the kind of woman to marry.

The beginning of chapter 31 says that this is the advice of king Lemuel's mother. It seems that she is giving him a vision of the kind of wife to pursue. Proverbs is oriented toward young men, giving them a vision for the wise life. And it includes a picture of the kind of woman to marry.

2. Secondly, this is for women to aspire to.

And this woman is portrayed as married, with children, and wealthy. But that's not the only way this wisdom can be lived out. In fact, do you know that there is one other women in the Bible who is called the virtuous woman? She's described with the same Hebrew words as this woman—the noble woman, or valiant woman. It's Ruth. And in some orderings of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Ruth comes immediately after Proverbs—right after this chapter. And she was called this as a widow, who didn't have children, and who was poor. But she also embodies wisdom in her life. So, if you are single, or not wealthy, or childless—you can still embrace the heart of this vision of virtue.

Carolyn McCulley wrote a great book on womanhood called *The Measure of Success*. Here's what she wrote about this chapter: "When I considered this for the first time, I laughed out loud. The very passage I often skipped because it was about an excellent wife was the key to understanding my singleness! Here was the guide I needed to understanding my femininity as a single woman and for showing me how to invest this season, this gift, in the church. As I studied the Proverbs 31 woman, the priorities for my life came into focus. The *role* that's described in this passage is that of a wife, but her godly, noble character is what all women should desire."ⁱⁱ

3. Third, this is for parents to teach their children.

Proverbs is framed as wisdom from a father to his sons. And chapter 31 is the advice king Lemuel received from his mother. So this is an example of how to instruct your children.

4. And finally, this is for husbands so they would honor their wives.

This whole poem is in praise of a virtuous woman. And, as we'll see, it's leading to the conclusion—where the husband honors and praises her. Husbands are called to respect and honor their wives, and this is an example to follow.

So this is who she is.

2. How She Serves Her Household (vv. 13–19)

Now, we'll look at the specifics. So, second, how she serves her household.

Verse 13 highlights here skill, hard work, and delight in what she does.

It says "she seeks wool and flax," which were raw materials that she uses to make clothing.

And when it says, "she works with willing hands," the word for "willing" is "delight." She values her work. She doesn't despise it. She doesn't view her work as a burden, but a blessing.

There are two metaphors to describe how she provides for her family.

The first is the merchant ship in verse 14: “She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.” She is able to go beyond what is locally available. She gets exotic food from afar so her family eats well.

The second metaphor is a lioness. When verse 15 says she rises while it’s still night to provide food, the word for “food” is “prey.” She is like a lioness that gets up at night to bring back prey for her young.

Now, look at her engaging in real estate and further investments and work in verse 16:

“She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.”

This doesn’t say her husband considers the field and buys it—*she* does. She considers the field first—she thinks it through, she looks at it from different angles. And then she buys it. Why? In order to plant a vineyard on it. And notice, it says “with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.” The fruit of her hands—that’s probably referring to money she made from the clothing we saw her make in verse 13. She made clothes, she sold them for a profit, and then she bought a field and planted a vineyard. She is making a long-term investment.

This is not a marriage where the husband controls the money to the point where this could never happen. This is not the kind of marriage where only the husband makes the big decisions on his own. No, she is competent and trusted with major purchases.

She is also strong.

This is verse 17, “She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.” So, here is a strong woman, a skilled woman, a financially competent woman.

And now verse 18 says she’s selling her merchandise for a profit.

She’s making money. She’s contributing to the income of the household. It says, “She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.” She doesn’t make the clothes as a hobby. She’s running a small business out of her home.

When it says “her lamp doesn’t go out at night,” it doesn’t mean she’s working all night long. It is probably a way of saying that she has wealth. If you couldn’t afford the oil for lamps, you had to put them out early. But if you were wealthy, you could afford to keep the lamps on.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is how she serves her household—with diligence, competency, skill, and economic engagement.

This doesn't fit two very prominent views promoted in our culture.

On one extreme is the view that women cannot be fulfilled without a career. In our post-industrial age, that often means working long hours out the home and unable to engage with children.

The other extreme reduces a woman's role to being confined to the four walls of a home.

There are some verses in the New Testament that people use to promote this confined view. For example, in Titus Paul refers to women being busy working in the home. But that doesn't mean what we often think it means. Paul was not sidelining women; he was telling them to be strategic with their influence. The home was a place where a lot of meaningful work was done.

The home in the ancient world was different than today. Carolyn McCulley's book, *The Measure of Success* earlier. She described how in colonial America husbands and wives both had their spheres of business, but they weren't often apart from each other. They both worked together with parenting. The children would often be trained for work by their dad. So, work and parenting weren't entirely separated.

Even stores were located in the front room, with living quarters in the back or above. Families were close and involved. For most of human history, the home was a small business unit, and women often had a role.^{iv}

The industrial revolution changed this. Work was largely moved outside the home and family business. This then took men out of the home and away for work; and women remained in the home. And then in the 1950s technological advances made all sorts of home activities more convenient. The result of all of this is that men took off for work, and this was viewed as meaningful. And then women stayed home to raise children, and this was viewed as less meaningful.

Proverbs 31 is not the same vision of the post-industrial world or the 1950s. This chapter gives us a vision of womanhood that is engaged in various aspects of life. It's going to be different for each woman. It's going to be different for different seasons of life. But this woman is strong, skilled, competent, and busy serving her family. She is working in the home, and also from the home, and also outside the home. And she works with willing hands—she is deeply delighted in her important role.

This is how she serves her household.

3. How She Extends Her Influence (vv. 20–27)

Now, third, she extends her influence in verses 20–27. Her household is still included, but her influence expands.

- Verse 20 shows us that she is generous and intentionally helps the needy: “She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.”

One reason why she works is to give to others. All through Proverbs, the righteous are those who value and help the poor.

- She is also confident and prepared for future trials.

Verse 21 says, “She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.” If extreme cold comes, her household is prepared.

- She also has a luxurious bedroom environment—and this would be for her own pleasure and her husbands.

Verse 22 says, “She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.” Those are not cheap materials. She uses high-quality and costly materials. And it’s for herself. She has a soft, luxurious, fashionable bed. That’s not condemned; it’s honored here.

- And then notice her husband’s influence in the community—partly owing to her support.

This is verse 23: “Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.” The city gate is where the community leaders met. This was where the leaders met to enact business and maintain order in the community.

Her husband can serve in this important leadership role because of her support. She enables him to serve in this role well. She is diligent with many things for the household so he can serve the community. Behind a wise, successful, godly man is often a wise, faithful, strong woman.

- Verse 24 picks up her small business work again. But it now adds that she makes and sells high-quality and fashionable clothes.
- And we see a tribute to her strength again in verse 25. But notice, this isn’t just her physical strength this time—it is her confidence. “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.”

We often get anxious about the time to come. We worry about the future. We fear for our children. We fear for the culture. We fear for our financial stability. And yet look at this strong and dignified woman—she is not anxious, worried, or fearful. She thinks about the future... and she *laughs at it*. Why? Because she is trusting the Lord. The deepest answer to our common anxieties is faith.

Who is this woman?

She is diligent, strong, skilled, industrious, organized, generous, and deeply trusting in the Lord.

Again, this is not necessarily a snap-shot of one moment in a particular woman's life. This is a poetic summary of a virtuous woman. Not everything here will map onto every wise woman's life.

But, taken as a whole—this kind of woman should be honored.

4. Why She Is Worthy of Honor (vv. 28–31)

And this is the fourth and final part—why she is worthy of honor.

This is verses 28–31. And notice that this is not just saying—in general, she should be esteemed. This is a specific call for specific people to express honor to her—both privately and publicly.

First of all, who is to honor her?

Verse 28 says her family honors her: “Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.” Praise. Her husband *praises* her. Her husband expresses esteem to her. He affirms and honors her, and *praises* her.

He doesn't feel intimidated by her. He doesn't feel insecure. He doesn't control her. He doesn't micromanage her. He doesn't domineer over her. He certainly doesn't abuse her. He doesn't belittle her. He doesn't yell at her. He doesn't shame her. He doesn't take her for granted. He doesn't overlook her.

He *praises* her. How so?

Not with a generic, “thanks” every once in a while. We hear what he says in verse 29: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” He is honoring her for her virtue and character here—and everything we've seen in this chapter.

And verse 30 calls us all to honor and praise women like her.

The whole chapter is moving toward these final verses. It says, “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”

This doesn’t mean she does not have charm or beauty. It is saying that these are not why she is praised. They are vain—which means here that they are fleeting. They are fading. They are not as deep and lasting. They are not the most important things about her.

What is most important? What makes her a noble and honorable woman? It’s the one thing that is accessible to any man or woman—it is that she “fears the Lord.” This is the source of her character. It starts with a posture of fearing God—which is a trusting reverence of God. We’ve seen through Proverbs that this is the beginning of wisdom, the foundation, and the posture of wisdom.

This whole vision of womanhood has always been countercultural.

- In the Ancient Near Eastern literature, women were praised for her beauty and charm. In
- Greek literature of the classical period, they praised the silent “homebody” wife.
- In American culture—some praise sexual beauty and charm, others praise a kind of homebody wife from the 1950s.

But the Bible presents the ideal as a woman who fears the Lord, and lives it out with wisdom.

Every woman can start with trusting and revering Christ, and then live it out with wisdom. And you can pursue the character of the woman of this chapter—strength, diligence, industry, generosity, hospitality, business savvy, compassion.

And for all of us—what should we do when we see this kind of character in a woman? We should honor her.

This is the final verse. It’s a command to everyone else: “Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.” She is to be honored not just privately by her husband and children, but publicly in the gates. Remember the city gate is the public square. It’s the place of leadership decisions.

And in this public place—we are to give her what she is due, which is praise and honor. She has earned it. She should be held in esteem and honored by people. Those who know her are responsible to speak highly of her. To commend her. Both privately and publicly.

Remember earlier I raised the question of whether or not this vision of womanhood is realistic.

Here is why I think it matters that we see that this is an ideal, but a realistic vision.

The article I read implied that if this vision is actually realistic, that is discouraging. And so the article argued that it is not a vision of womanhood so much as a personification of wisdom.

But consider this: if this is *not* attainable, then *that* is actually discouraging.

Because it dishonors the women who *do* embody wisdom across their lives by God's grace. And it will keep the rest of us from actually honoring the woman who do pursue this.

The whole point of this text is to *honor* women who live like this. But if we say that this text puts too much pressure on women, and then we explain this away as merely a personification of wisdom—then what are we saying? We're saying that this kind of wise womanhood isn't actually attainable at all. You'll never be able to live this way.

And that means none of you do, and so we don't need to actually honor you for this.

But what if this isn't meant to pressure women into feeling bad for not attaining this vision? What if this is actually an inspiring ideal that, by God's grace, he can transform you to pursue? And as you do—in whatever steps you take toward this—then we honor you for it.

And remember, this chapter does not require you get married, gain wealth, and raise kids to receive this honor. The chapter ends by focusing on the main thing: a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. And then the book of Ruth shows it embodied in a poor, childless widow.

Now, some of you may be truly discouraged when you read this chapter. And maybe you have been going the wrong direction in life. Or maybe you have not yet come to know Christ and receive his transforming power. But you can. And God can change you.

Implications

So, let's wrap up by remembering how this applies to each of us.

First, for anyone who knows a woman like this: praise her.

This poem ends with the husband praising this wife. And children calling her blessed. And her works praised in the city gates, the public square.

Husbands, whenever you see this embodied in even a small way, honor it. Regularly praise and honor your wife. Praise her in private, and praise her to others. You are a guardian of her reputation—don't gossip or complain about her; honor her to others.

And younger kids and youth—commend your mom for her character as well.

Second, for young men: and seek a wife with this kind of Christ-centered life and character.

This was originally wisdom from king Lemuel's mother to him. And the book of Proverbs is framed as wisdom for young men preparing for adulthood. This is here for you to know what kind of woman to seek to marry, and then to honor. Don't be infatuated with beauty and charm, because they fade. Look for true beauty in character. Look for someone who trusts and reveres Christ.

And consider what kind of man you need to be to win the heart of a woman like this. You need to be the kind of man we saw in the first part of this chapter—a man who fears the Lord and exercises moral restraint for the sake of promoting justice.

Third, for women: get this vision of true womanhood to pursue and enjoy in your own situation.

This poem gives an poetic, idealistic, composite picture of a wise life well lived. It will look different in various seasons of life. And this poem doesn't account for her sins and failures, which we all have.

And don't receive this as a pressurized vision of perfection that you have to conform to. This is a beautiful picture of the kind of life Christ can transform you to live. And unique to your circumstance. You just embrace the posture of humility and the trusting reverence of Christ, and he will transform you.

And many of you women have been transformed, but people don't commend you for it. And you may be self-critical and not even see it in yourself. But you can learn to honor the Spirit's work by seeing how he's changed you. And you can know that one day Jesus will commend you, and say "well done," even if no one else does.

Fourth, parents, teach this vision to your children.

Proverbs is a curriculum to teach your children. This was wisdom that Lemuel learned from his mother. This is wisdom that the father in Proverbs is passing to his sons. This was for the all the children of Israel to learn.

Our culture is very confused about what it means to be a woman. Show your daughters what Christ can create in their lives. And show your sons what kind of virtues to honor women for. And to not just chase fleeting outer beauty, but also inner beauty.

Fifth, as a church family, honor and commend women who embody character and virtue.

Our church is filled with women that are trusting Christ and that the Spirit is transforming. And so we want to honor and esteem his work in our midst. So many women are living out the fear of the Lord in their own circumstances. Many teach with competency. They are entrepreneurial. They lead ministries, they teach their children, they lead in vocations.

And many live this out like Ruth—through suffering, or unwanted singleness, or a difficult financial season. They are nevertheless trusting Christ, serving with their gifts, giving generously, caring for those in need.

And so we want to honor God’s work in your life.

Finally, for all of us...

The most important line of this text is the source of her wisdom—the fear of the Lord. Proverbs began with this, and it ends with this. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And this is a trusting reverence in God.

The fear of the Lord is the posture of someone who is trusting in Christ. It is the posture of someone who knows they *cannot* attain this kind of life in their own strength. It’s the posture of someone who knows they have failed.

And so this text reminds all of us that Jesus did not come to reward people for being wise. He came to save sinners and fools, and to then make them wise. He came to save people who know they have wrecked their lives, or they would wreck it without his grace.

And so we end with the posture that we began: With a humble, open-handed trust in Christ. Receiving his forgiveness, and welcoming his wisdom.

ⁱ Bruce Waltke shows how surprising this is. Only here and Judges 20:36 (trusting people in battle) is someone ok to trust anything or anyone other than God. Everywhere else, trusting in anyone or anything other than God is condemned. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 521.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/were-not-on-hold-biblical-femininity-for-single-women>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 527.

^{iv} Carolyn McCulley, *The Measure of Success* (Nashville: B &H, 214), 47.