

True Masculinity and Leadership (Proverbs 31:1–9)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life
Zionsville Fellowship | April 12, 2026 | Drew Hunter

What does it mean to be a man? What is true masculinity and what does it look like in leadership?

We're in the midst of a culture that doesn't know how to answer this. We have competing visions of masculinity and leadership.

We've heard the term, "toxic masculinity." That doesn't refer to all masculinity, but it often gives that impression. Many grow up feeling like there's something wrong with them because they are men. And that if they stepped into leadership roles with power and authority, that's a problem.

I've referred to Nancy Pearcey's book, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*. A few years ago she told her class that she was writing a book on masculinity. And one student said, "What masculinity? It's been beaten out of us."ⁱ

The result is that boys and men feel devalued and demoralized. They feel like they are a problem just because they are men. This ends up polarizing them: some become passive; others move to the other extreme of a selfish hyper-masculinity that is truly toxic.

So what do we need? What do young men and students need?

We need a view of true masculinity. We need to see the good vision of manhood that God built into us. And then we need to call men to lead for the good of others.

In our series in Proverbs, we're seeing that God designed the world to work a certain way. And wisdom means seeing truth and reality and adjusting to joyfully live in line with it.

Our text this morning gives us a vision of true masculinity and leadership. It gives us a clear vision for men to receive and live-out in their lives.

Our question this morning is: what does wise manhood and leadership look like? Proverbs 31 gives us the answer: **It is exercising moral restraint for the sake of promoting justice, especially for the vulnerable.**ⁱⁱ

Here's the context before we read it. This is the final and culminating chapter in the book. This is not an appendix or epilogue—it's where the whole book is heading. This is what wisdom looks like when it is embodied in men and women. We'll see the Proverbs 31 women in a couple weeks; but this morning is the Proverbs 31 man, and it's embodied in the wisdom given to a king.

Proverbs 31:1–9

- 1 The words of King Lemuel.
An oracle that his mother taught him:
- 2 What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb?
What are you doing, son of my vows?
- 3 Do not give your strength to women,
your ways to those who destroy kings.
- 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
it is not for kings to drink wine,
or for rulers to take strong drink,
- 5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed
and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.
- 6 Give strong drink to the one who is perishing,
and wine to those in bitter distress;
- 7 let them drink and forget their poverty
and remember their misery no more.
- 8 Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
- 9 Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

What is true masculinity and leadership? **It is exercising moral restraint for the sake of promoting justice, especially for the vulnerable.**

How do we get this vision worked into our lives? We see three main ways: learn wisdom for leadership, guard against temptations that destroy leaders, and pursue justice for the vulnerable.

1. Learn Wisdom for Leadership (vv. 1–2)

First, learn wisdom for leadership.

The opening introduces us to a mother calling her son to receive wisdom for his leadership.

The son is King Lemuel—and he is passing on the wisdom his mother gave him here. Read these opening lines again: 1 The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him: 2 What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb? What are you doing, son of my vows?

This is the only place in the Bible that we hear of Lemuel. His name probably means something like “belonging to God” or “dedicated to God.”ⁱⁱⁱ He was probably named this because his mom devoted him to God. Do you see in verse 2 that she called him, “son of my vows”? This probably refers to her making a vow to God—that if she gave her a child, she would dedicate him to God. That’s what Hannah did with Samuel.

That's a fitting name in light of his role. He is a king—and his very name is “dedicated to God.” That's how we should view our lives—and how we should view manhood and leadership. We are to dedicate our lives not to our own self-indulgence and selfish ambition—but to God and his purposes.

What is also striking about this is that this mother and Son don't seem to be part of Israel.

We don't have any record of a king named Lemuel in Israel's history. He was probably a foreign king.^{iv} So here we have a foreign royal family—and this mother is raising a foreign king. But she devotes him to *God*, and calls him to rule with justice. We see glimpses of other nations in the Old Testament that are influenced by Israel. And here a royal family is seeking to lead their nation according to God's wisdom.

This confirms what we've seen throughout Proverbs. This book is *very* concerned with government and leadership. And the wisdom of this book is not just for Ancient Israel. Proverbs gives wisdom for *any* government, and *any* ruler, and *any* nation. It is creational wisdom based on God's design for the world. Proverbs is an underrated source of wisdom for national leadership. It is wisdom not just for ancient Israel, but all human society.

And the main call in this opening section is for Lemuel to *listen*.

She says three times, “what are you doing, my son?” That makes her sound exasperated by his behavior. Maybe some of you parents can relate. You know what it's like to say, “What are you doing? What in the world? I mean, just why?”

But this phrase “what are you doing” could just be translated as “listen.” I think that's probably right. She is probably just emphatically calling her son to listen to the wisdom she is about to give. Either way—that's the point. Lemuel needs to receive wisdom.

And so do we.

Let's think for a moment about who this text is really here for. Yes, this is the wisdom from a mother to her son, who will be a king. But is this just advice for future kings?

No, Lemuel is now passing on this wisdom to everyone else. And this was included in Proverbs so all God's people could receive it. So, let's me give a few reflections about the relevance of this text, and this call to listen.

1. First, this *is* advice for kings and government leaders.

This mother's instruction is relevant to every king, every president, every leader. And in our nation where voting citizens share in governance, this is wisdom for us. And every leader is called to receive the wisdom of God. God instituted governments; and leaders need his wisdom. Many problems in our world are traced back to foolish government leaders.

2. Second, this is wisdom for anyone who leads.

Remember, Proverbs is especially wisdom for young men launching into adulthood. These are the future leaders of families, communities, and the nation. Many people become parents, bosses, pastors, and government leaders—but they lack true wisdom. We need to listen to true wisdom—and it's right here in Proverbs.

3. Third, this is a model for those who raise future leaders.

This mother recognizes that she is raising a little boy who will influence her nation. So, she intentionally calls him to listen to her wisdom to lead well.

Proverbs repeatedly gives us a model for parents to raise their children with wisdom. This whole book is a curriculum in wisdom for parents to give their children.

This mother understands that *she* will influence her nation *through* her son. Lemuel's nation may give him credit for his leadership, but we know his mother stands behind him. History is shaped by great men and women—and it was often their mothers who gave them the wisdom they needed.

Tim Challies wrote a book called *Devoted: Great Men and Their Godly Moms*.

Here's what he wrote: "History tells of women whose love for the Bible shaped its earliest and most prominent teachers, and women whose unceasing prayers led to the long-awaited salvation of their wayward sons. It tells of women who were great theologians in their own right, yet whose only students were their own children, whose only classroom the kitchen. It tells of women who laid an early foundation in the lives of their sons that, despite their best efforts, they could never undermine. It tells, time and again, of Christian men who owe so much to their godly mothers."^v

For example, Charles Spurgeon—the 19th century London preacher—said, "I am sure that, in my early youth, no teaching ever made such an impression upon my mind as the instruction of my mother."

And the theologian J. Gresham Machen said, "my mother [spoke to me] in those dark hours when the lamp burned dim, when I thought that faith was gone and shipwreck had been made of my soul. 'Christ,' she used to say, 'keeps firmer hold on us than we keep on him.'"

4. And finally, this is wisdom for everyone—not just leaders. Because in the Bible, the king was to be the pacesetter of virtue for the people. He was to be an example. When we hear Lemuel's mother's advice, we are hearing wisdom for all of us.

But the urgency of this wisdom is ratcheted up for leaders because they have outsized influence. The more power and authority you have, the more there is at stake.

So, this leads to the second section.

2. Guard Against Temptations that Destroy Leaders (vv. 3–7)

So, first, listen to wisdom for leadership. Second, guard against temptations that destroy leaders.

Verses 3–7 warn about two temptations that can corrupt a leader’s life and judgment. These are two ways that self-indulgence keeps leaders from serving the common good. The two topics are *sexuality* and *sobriety*.

The first is about sexuality—the temptation of self-indulgent pursuit of women.

This is verse 3, “Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings.”

This is not at all diminishing the value and importance of women or marriage. This whole text is advice from a godly mother. And the next section honors a wife of virtue.

The concern is about giving your strength, energy, and time to many women. History is marked by men in power who have many relationships, concubines, or wives.

Lemuel’s mom says this is a problem because it destroys kings—it destroys leaders.

It can corrupt a king’s moral judgment.

It may take away his time, energy, and wealth.

It may also be an issue of using his power selfishly and for self-indulgence.

Leaders with power often have more access and opportunities and temptations.

But this is not what authority is for—it is not for self-indulgence, but sacrificial service.

This could not be more relevant today. And our own culture has grown less concerned about this over time. This is a call to leaders to exercise moral restraint.

The biblical vision is one man and one woman, married with loyalty for life. Either that, or singleness that is devoted to serving Christ. And in either situation—moral restraint.

The second topic is sobriety—the temptation of self-indulgent intoxication.

Verses 4–5 say, “4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, 5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.”

This is about intoxication; not all drinking. The specific concern is the effect of drunkenness—he will forget decrees and pervert the rights of the afflicted. If he gets drunk, his judgment will be clouded and he may distort justice.

We should not blame alcohol itself for the problems of drunkenness. The Bible is clear that alcohol can be received as a good gift, even while drunkenness is condemned. From beginning to end, the Bible affirms the goodness of alcohol in moderation.

Wine was part of Israel's feasts.

Psalm 104 says God gives it to cheer our hearts.

The prophets described the new creation as filled with the joy that wine gives.

Jesus turned water to the best wine at a wedding feast.

He even instituted the drinking of wine as part of the Lord's Supper.

And the Apostle Paul told Timothy to take wine for medicinal purposes.

So, the Bible is not anti-alcohol.

But it is against the misuse and abuse of alcohol. It is against dependence, addiction, and drunkenness. It warns about how over-drinking turns you into a fool.

And it is especially problematic for leaders—which is why Lemuel's mother warns him. The more responsibility you have for others, the more is at stake if you misuse alcohol.

Some of you know the damage first-hand. You've seen the accumulated waste of money. You've seen how it replaces affection with anger. It replaces encouragement with passivity. It replaces wisdom with folly. It corrupts character.

Lemuel's mom then gives one of the ways that alcohol *can* be used.

She says to give it to people in certain situations as an act of compassion. This is verses 6–7: “Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; 7 let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.”

I don't think this condones drunkenness for everyone who has problems. That would be foolish. I think the governing phrase is, “the one who is perishing.” These are people who are about to die, they are in misery, and they are impoverished. This is a form of relief or palliative care. Remember, they didn't have modern medicines and morphine back then. I think of the Westerns when someone has their leg shot off and is about to die—and someone mercifully gives them a drink to ease the pain.

Now, we can get distracted by this broader topic of alcohol with this text. But notice the point: Lemuel's mother is saying to show compassion to the perishing. Let's not miss that when the Bible addresses those in misery here, it doesn't commend euthanasia. It commends a compassionate alleviation of suffering.

So, let's see the broader point here: this is a call to guard against temptations that destroy leaders.

If you are a leader in any area of life, the first person you need to lead is yourself.
You cannot lead others well if you do not lead yourself.
If you do not lead yourself well, you will eventually harm the people you lead.

Do you see how that is the mother's concern in verse 5? She doesn't just say, "don't get drunk because then you'll mess up your life." No, she says, "don't get drunk because then you'll forget the rights of the afflicted."

So, when we think of leadership, we need to think in concentric circles. You are at the center, then your closest relationships are the next ring, then your public leadership is the next ring. To lead well in the outward circles, you have to lead yourself.

Some people are very skilled and passionate about changing the world. About starting businesses. About doing good and serving in a vocation or the government or ministry. But they neglect their own souls and character. And the corruption of that inner-circle of the self ends up poisoning the outer circles. The rot in the inner circle will eventually affect the outer ones.

Learn wisdom for leadership, guard yourself against temptations that ruin leaders...

3. Pursue Justice for the Vulnerable (v8-9)

And now, third and finally: Pursue justice for the vulnerable.

This is verse 8–9: "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. 9 Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

This is actively speaking and serving on behalf of the vulnerable. You open your mouth for them, because they can't speak for themselves.

They are not necessarily physically mute or unable to talk.

They are powerless and so their voice isn't heard.

They don't have power and authority to defend their own rights.

They lack a voice to defend themselves in court.

Or they are too illiterate or uneducated or inarticulate to make a compelling case.

Or they are too poor to obtain evidence for their case.

Or they are too lowly to command respect and get a hearing.

The world needs people who have power and authority to defend their rights.

Many people are opening their mouths—they are activists, lobbyists, journalists, and celebrities with a platform. They use the word injustice, and they claim to defend victims. But that doesn't mean they are advocating for true justice.

This is why Christians need to think carefully about justice.

Our conversations about justice are particularly challenging in our culture. They are difficult for many reasons.

As I thought about this text this week, I noticed four factors that make our conversations hard today. So, here are four things we need to pay attention to in order to make our conversations more productive.

Let me introduce them each with one word—truth, consistency, urgency, responsibility.

1. First, truth.

We need to discern what is true justice and what is not.

Lemuel's mother tells him to pursue justice. *But what is justice?* Many people advocate for justice, but we don't all agree on what is truly right. Not everything called social justice is truly just. Not everything called a right is truly a right.

And one reason for this is because people don't share the same standard of truth. Many in our culture don't believe in objective truth. But as the civil rights leader John Perkins wrote, "Without truth, there can be no justice. And what is the ultimate standard of truth? It is not our feelings. It is not popular opinion. It is not what presidents or politicians say. God's Word is the standard of truth. If we're trying harder to align with the rising opinions of our day than with the Bible, then we ain't doing real justice."^{vi}

We need to think through what is truly just or unjust. We need discernment. And we need to get our understanding from God's word and his standard of justice.

2. Second, consistency.

We need to be consistently just, rather than selective in the concerns we say are important.

Lemuel is to care about four kinds of people mentioned: the mute, all who are destitute, the poor, and the needy. These people lacked power in ancient societies. Lemuel is to make sure they all have their rights.

He is not to pick and choose. The Old Testament also often includes the orphans, widows, and immigrants. Who are the vulnerable to day? It would also include the homeless, the handicapped, many elderly people, and children in the womb, and single mothers.

We are tempted to care only about *poverty*, or only care about *racism*, or only care about the *unborn*, or only care about *immigration*, or only care about *criminal justice*, or only care about *domestic abuse*. Or we care about a few of these, but neglect others.

It is right and good for some people to give themselves to one issue over others. But we need to make sure we care about all injustices.

But we need to care about every form of injustice—and this is especially true for those who are in leadership positions like Lemuel.

3. Third, urgency.

We need to give proper weight and priority to the most urgent issues.

Lemuel should care about all injustice, but he is told to prioritize the *most* vulnerable here.

We can be passionate about certain topics. But we still need to recognize that in any given culture, some issues are more urgent and pressing. To say that one issue is the most pressing doesn't mean that the other issues don't matter. But on the other hand, to say that we should care about all injustices doesn't mean we neglect the most urgent.

So, you've heard me say many times—I believe the most urgent injustice of our time is the plight of the unborn. They are the most vulnerable, their plight is the most severe, and they have no power to do anything about it.

The justice of a society is determined by how they treat the most vulnerable among them. Our culture pretends to be just by caring about various issues—but they redefine personhood so that this issue doesn't factor in. This allows for the discarding of the unborn through abortions and some forms of IVF.

4. Here's the fourth category: responsibility.

We are not all equally responsible for all the injustices in the world. God does not hold everyone equally accountable for all the problems in the world.

Lemuel is a king, and he has a unique responsibility to care for all these issues. Not every citizen has the time, emotional capacity, or responsibility to care about everything.

Because of the internet and social media, we all feel responsible for everything. Kevin DeYoung wrote, "the circle of obligation feels limitless. Life feels like ten thousand victims on the side of the road, and we are told we must be the good Samaritan in every instance."^{vii}

Lemuel also has a unique authority to execute justice and punishment through force. So, while individual citizens are not to mete out the death sentence, a government can. But we are not all equally able to make these judgments and carry them out.

Those are four things that make conversations about justice difficult.

Acknowledging these four categories can help us make progress in our conversations.

You can summarize them with four words: truth, consistency, urgency, and responsibility.

Am I identifying something that is *truly* unjust, and based on what standard?

Am I *consistent* with the injustices I see, or am I being selective?

Am I acknowledging that some issues are more *urgent* than others?

And who is actually *responsible* for this?

The key point of verses 8–9 is this: We all, and especially leaders, need to pursue justice on behalf of the most vulnerable.

What is the purpose of authority, leadership, and power? It is not for the sake of self-indulgence. It is for the sake of sacrificial service. It is not for personal advancement, but for public justice. It is not a privilege, but a responsibility.

And this is why we need people with the wisdom of Lemuel’s mother to lead. To use this wisdom in parenting. To lead this way in your business. In the legal system. In the government. In whatever role you have.

The True King

Now, let me conclude with a problem... and our only solution.

First, the problem.

The problem is... just learning this text and receiving this wisdom won’t change the world. We could think, *if we could just get all the leaders in the world to read this text, that would solve our problems*. And then we would start printing this out and mailing it out to everyone. Put it on bumper stickers. Send it to the white house and congress. Send it to prime ministers, and presidents, and chancellors. Surely if we could just get them to see this, everything would be better.

It won’t work. Because we live in a fallen world. And this means that all of us, deep within, are inclined away from wisdom. We may assent to its goodness, but we can’t pull it off.

And maybe you sensed this intuitively during this whole message. We no doubt were thinking of all the ways people, and we ourselves, have *failed* to do this. This text—on the surface—doesn’t give us hope as much as it exposes our problem.

So, what is the solution?

The Old Testament itself provided the solution. It's expressed in text after text—and it is the hope of one true king who would come and set all things right. And this king came—and his name is Jesus.

Listen to Psalm 72, which presents the hope of this coming king. And listen to how he fulfills our hope:

- 1 Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
- 2 May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
- 3 Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
- 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!

- 5 May they fear you while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
- 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!
- 7 In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!

Jesus came as the embodiment of true leadership.

He was the true Lemuel—the one whose name meant, “dedicated to God.”
His ear was open to wisdom.
He exercised moral restraint fully and perfectly.
He was magnetically drawn toward the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed.

And he saw us in our own distress and need. He saw us in our moral bankruptcy. He saw that we fail to fulfill this vision of selfless leadership and love. And he saw that we were destined for God's just judgment against our sin.

And he stepped in to protect us from the very judgment we deserve.
And Jesus gladly assumed the responsibility to sacrifice himself to rescue us.
He gave himself on the cross—he endured the unjust oppression of public murder.
And he did this for us—that we might be forgiven and also transformed.

And what is he doing now? He is reigning as the one true king over all things. And he is transforming his people to live like him—with moral restraint in order to pursue justice.

And one day he will come again to bring a new creation of perfect justice.

So, as we leave, let's leave worshipping him.

If you have not received Jesus's forgiveness and mercy, come to him. Repent of your failure to live with this kind of selfless love, and receive his forgiveness. And receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to renew you and make you like him.

And if you have received his grace—and you are a Christian—keep receiving his grace. He has mercy for every failure.

And then seek—in whatever role you have—to be transformed to live with his wisdom.

We started by considering our cultures impoverished view of masculinity and leadership.

The answer to this is not passivity or self-indulgent domination. It is the wisdom of Jesus.

So, let's live-out and promote this vision together. It's what our homes, and workplaces, and government needs.

And it's what young men need to hear. Rather than berating them for being men, which only leads them demoralized and vulnerable to an unbiblical vision... we can affirm and encourage true masculinity.

ⁱ Nancy Percy, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2023), 18.

ⁱⁱ Doug Wilson defined masculinity as, "the glad assumption of sacrificial responsibility."

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 503.

^{iv} Verse 1 could also be translated "king of Massa," which would be a foreign nation.

^v From the first of a series of articles that were later developed into the book. <https://www.challies.com/christian-men-and-their-godly-moms/christian-men-and-their-godly-moms/>

^{vi} John Perkins, foreword to Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice Without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask About Social Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), xvi.

^{vii} Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), 77.