

IN PRAISE OF A GREAT WOMAN

Proverbs 31:10-31

An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.
She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens.
She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.
She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant.
Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:
“Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.
Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

More than once this week when I told some people that I was preaching from Proverbs 31, from more than one mom I got a sigh. I have on my desk a recent copy of Time Magazine, celebrating the 100 most influential people in the world. You know, they are politicians and entertainers and inventors. Sometimes you open to one of these pages and you find a little bio. You read about some guy who solved this at age 5, and invented this at age 7, and made his first million by age 10,

and graduated from Harvard by age 12. It's a slight exaggeration, but you read it and then you feel like, "Wow, what am I doing with my life?" I suppose that there is the sensation when you read about this woman in Proverbs 31 and if we don't use this text properly, you could feel condemned. I don't know, moms; When I read this passage and came to verse 28, "her children rise up and call her blessed," if you heard that and said, "Yes, that happens every day for me."

I have to admit that I have heard that phrase used sarcastically more than sincerely all too often. "Her husband is known in the gates, he sits in the gates." You may be thinking, "My husband sits on the couch." The reality is when you read a passage like this, mom, perhaps it stirs something in you where you are tempted to feel like you are not a success. Parenting is not easy. It holds out a tremendous challenge for us. Part of the challenge is that our hearts are so connected to this great effort that when we feel that we are not succeeding, it hurts more deeply. It is possible, I admit, that a passage like this could remind us of those feelings. I will confess to you that I have never preached on Proverbs 31 for that reason. I guess I've just been a little bit of a coward, but today is the day!

I want to start with this question: How do we use this text? What is its purpose? Because I certainly don't believe it is to bring condemnation. I don't think it's to be used as a law or as a resource to create expectations by which you measure yourself. So, how do we use it? Is this text relevant for our day? Is it sexist? Is it speaking of a way that's now gone? Is the woman who is presented here really relevant in our century? Is it archaic? Is it irrelevant? Is it a document for another time? Is it this picture where the man sits at the gate and the woman is doing all the work?

I think this passage is anything but sexist. This woman is amazing. Sometimes we hear that scripture confines women and limits them and has this narrowly defined role. There are all these things that women can't do, but that's certainly not the case with the woman that you read about in this passage. I think it was incredibly progressive for the day in which it was written, and incredibly relevant and helpful for our day.

Or is this passage burdensome? Is it too demanding? This woman is industrious. She is diligent. She is creative. She has her own business. She knows business. She knows agriculture. She is a seamstress. She has servants. On top of it all, she is a person of incredible character. She is kind.

She is compassionate. She is fearless. She is faithful. She is graceful. She is powerful. And you may be thinking, “I don’t like her.”

So, how do we use this text? The text holds up an ideal -- not a comprehensive ideal, not an exhaustive ideal -- and I want to suggest to you that ideals are helpful. They are necessary. They are important. It’s good for us, whether it’s theoretical or historical, to have historical, theoretical heroes and ideals that we look to when we think about how we want to live.

This passage is actually a great blessing! Ladies, it tells you that you can be and do anything that you want to do if you have a heart that belongs to God. My contention is that this passage is liberating, envisioning, and empowering. We don’t use it as a law or list of expectations, but we use it, to start with, as a resource to provide vision for life.

At the end of the passage as the passage draws to a close, we are told three times that this woman is to be praised. Her husband praises her in verse 28. Verse 30: “A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” Verse 31: Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.” There is something excellent about her life. Verse 29: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Actually, if we read Hebrew we would understand that every verse in this passage begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and it moves if you will, from A to Z in our language. It is very deliberately holding up for us this image of excellence, which is to be praised, and it points to the power and the importance of vision.

Just this past week I was with a friend, Rick Andreassen, who started Saints. Saints is a program that provides physical education for homeschoolers, for those who are home educated. So I asked him about how he came to do this. He said he was sitting on a plane and the Lord put two words in his heart: Homeschool P.E. He started with eight kids and two volunteers. He had been on staff at a church for 11 years and he went out to start this program. Currently Saints is in six states. They have 18 facilities that they operate in in Florida alone, and they are in five nations. It started with two simple words: Homeschool P.E. In Haiti, where they are working, they have been given use of the Olympic facility outside of Port-au-Prince. It’s a simple vision, right? “We are going to help children.” Now it has moved beyond those who home educate. “We are going to help children who don’t have access to training in this area – we are going to just serve them.” And it has

exploded. Every year thousands and thousands of kids are being reached. It's the power of vision. It started simply, moving forward to the glory of God.

If I talk to you about moral purity, and if I take all of our young people and put them in a room and start laying out for you, "Listen, here is what God commands of your life, and here are the dangers of sexual immorality, and here is what it leads to," I may be educating you about a very important topic, and everything I may be saying to you may be true. It may be helpful in one sense, but it is not powerful as a vision is for moral purity. I would contend that a young man or a young woman who possesses a vision for living a pure life to the glory of God is much more prepared to walk that out, because when he or she gets in the moment of temptation, to have more than "I ought not to do this," or "I ought to do that," again, which is valid and which we don't apologize for, but the man who understands that there is dignity and there is honor in self-discipline in this area and lives to be married to one woman and to give himself physically and affectionately to that person is empowered with a life vision which will help him succeed.

As a church we want to care for the orphan in our city. We have been given this mandate from scripture. I can talk to you about how we are so blessed. Many of us have so much resource. I can use guilt to push you into trying to open your life and open your home to a foster child. It might produce some response, but guilt and condemnation are not as powerful as a life vision. God is father to the fatherless. He gives you this invitation. He says, "Come to me and experience my mercy, and I will invite you into my family. I will love you and care for you and provide for you. Then I will give you the blessing of carrying my mission." And God fills us with a vision toward that end.

Right now in Broward County, all the churches are gathering in unity. Pastors and leaders are gathering. Do you know what our goal is for this year? Our goal is that every foster child in Broward County will have a home. You know what? It's doable. We need several hundred more homes. We have more churches than that – twice as many churches. If we will get a vision for that goal, then every time a child is taken out of a home because they have been abandoned or abused or neglected or put in danger, they will go not to some facility, not to some institution, but to a family that will care for them, whether it be for a day or for much longer. It's the power of vision in God for doing the will of God.

In this passage we could dissect the vision in many ways. I would summarize the vision of this mom, this woman, in these terms:

- Excellence: She is doing all things well.
- Serving others: she is serving her family, she is serving those in need, she is caring for others, she is outward in her focus and attention. Of course, there is a goal there that's found throughout scripture that resonates with us, that greatness is found in serving others.
- Diligence: She is hard-working.
- Fearless: She is constantly growing and experiencing new things because she is stepping into new areas as she uses the gifts that God has given her.

So this morning in our time together, I want to use this passage to talk to moms first, but to all of us, about developing a life vision. Now, I'm not going to dissect more deeply the vision of this particular woman. I have summarized it. We will talk about it. But I think the most helpful thing that I want to talk about is how to live a glorious life, how to construct a vision for a great life. I am going to give you two points, okay? One long point and one short point, and I want to start with the long point. These two points are two navigating principles, principles that give us direction as we shape a vision for life. Let me give you the two principles.

- I. The first principle is: She is simple.
- II. The second principle is: She is complicated.

Alright? I heard some "Amens."

- I. The longer point: She is simple.

There is a life principle that is so packed with vitality that it pushes itself out into fruit of various shapes and sizes. The woman that is described here lives by this life principle. She is driven by a life principle. In fact, the passage is not so much about the many things that this woman does to be great, but that she does one thing that makes all of the other things possible. In verse 30 we read, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." I would suggest to you that this basic driving force of her life is the first navigating principle to great

vision. We live for the glory of God. A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. She is to be commended.

I am summarizing that Old Testament idea. It's actually a biblical idea – the fear of the Lord. It speaks of a reverence, awe and honor that we give to God. It does have a sense of foreboding in that we understand that our destiny, our lives rest with God. So, there is an element of fear, but it's not this servile fear. We are in awe and wonder of God and his greatness and his glory. He made and redeemed us. His splendor is all around us and we are in awe of who he is and the fact that our very next breath depends on him sustaining us.

We live for the glory of God. I would summarize it like this, just expanded a little bit, to say that the goal of this message is to give us a vision for living a great life that comes from living for the glory of God by faith in God alone, by faith in Christ alone. I am just spreading out that main idea of living for the glory of God to include trusting in God alone. I think you will see that as we make this first very long point.

The glory of God – she lives to please God. She lives for the glory of God. Jesus taught us in the model prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name....” Lord, we are praying, we are living for this one great aim: For your name to be honored, for your name to be glorified. We have stated our church vision like this: “To God alone be the glory.” Another way of saying that is “The glory of God in all things.” We believe that this is due north on the compass. This is our main aim and we want to learn in all that we do, connect all that we do to the glory of God.

So, for the Proverbs 31 woman -- she is made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Ladies, you were made to reflect God's glory. You were made in his image. Men, you were made in the image of God, but that image was marred by sin.

We look at our world and we see that there is something glorious about it. There is something wonderful. We see humanity as wonderful, made in the image of God, but we also see something is off. Something is very wrong. We see the presence of sin and the detachment from God. The biblical message is very simple: You are a glorious creature made in the image of God, and you have been deeply affected by sin. That has brought death and destruction. And God sent his son,

Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty of that sin and to free you from it. The scripture is this glorious narrative of God's creation, lost and now redeemed in Jesus Christ.

So, for the Christian -- 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it all to the glory of God." We could go to verse after verse where we are told that we live for, we were created for, we became Christians and we were saved for this purpose of living for the glory of God. But I would like to just turn to two passages, rather than just kind of give you a list of individual verses. The first one is Psalm 115. Would you turn to Psalm 115? It should be just to the left of Proverbs 31. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." The emphasis in these first three verses is this: The psalmist is leading us to say, "God, we want to live for your glory and not our own glory." If we don't get that right, people will not see that we are called by your name. They will not properly associate us with you. If we live for ourselves, we will fail to be a light to the nations.

As he is praying that, he lets you know that he is serious about this. He is serious about this glory thing, living for the glory of God. He is saying, "You are in the heavens. You rule. You are supreme. Your will is the last word." And that transitions him into a very important concept, because he started with this idea of, "Not to us, but to your name," and he is going to develop that now as he talks to us about idols in verse 4. "Their idols (the nations' idols) are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat." Hold your finger right there at the end of verse 7.

He is saying that the principle of sin is the principle of idolatry. We look back at these ancient cultures and we see how man throughout history has carved things and created things to worship in place of God. But that principle goes beyond that very crude expression of idolatry. There is constantly a temptation for you and me to take something that's made, something that's created, something that's temporal, and look to it and say, "This is the key to my happiness." "If I have the right romantic relationship, if I am married, or if I have children, if I have enough money, if I have success, if I have fame" – whatever it is. We have a capacity to see all kinds of created things as the ultimate thing in life.

That is especially true for us as parents. It's so easy for us to take the precious gift of our children and then...normally idols are good things. Normally they are gifts from God that we want to turn into ultimate things. In this passage we are taught that if we do that, we render these things lifeless. If you are taking notes, you want to get two things at this point: Idols draw the life out of precious things. If you make your children an idol, you will draw the life out of that relationship, because your children are not God and they cannot be God.

The second thing is this – it's found in verse 8, right where we stopped -- “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.” That's the idea. When we start to worship created things and look for life to be solved in these relationships, or whatever it may be, we draw the life out of those things. But then, what happens? It starts to draw the life out of us. We become like them.

Some of you are looking perplexed. I feel like maybe I need to just preach this whole point all over again. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths but do not speak; eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear; noses but do not smell. They have hands but do not feel; feet but do not walk; and they do not make a sound with their throat.” What is his emphasis? They are lifeless. They are dead. When we idolatry things, we suck the life right out of them, just as much as we would a stone statue.

God made you, moms, to know the joy of serving and giving; and it's so noble and so wonderful, and you do it from the heart. Probably our greatest spiritual danger in that moment is that those things would then capture our hearts and own our hearts. When we do that, we go down into a dangerous place where we begin to lose vitality in those wonderful relationships.

So the psalmist is calling us here to live for the glory of God, #1, then you saw it at the end of verse 8. You see it in verse 9, “O Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and their shield.” Live for the glory of God by faith in God, by the strength that God gives us. This is our simple calling in life. The Proverbs 31 woman is governed by this life principle. She has one simple aim, and everything else in life flows from it.

Now, would you go with me to Matthew Chapter 6? I want to just demonstrate the simplicity of it. There is an interesting verse and concept here that really help us develop this theme. Matthew

6:22-23: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

When we read Jesus’ teaching here, it’s difficult for us to really grasp what he is trying to say. It helps if you know that when Jesus says, “if your eye is healthy,” the Greek word there is “haplous.” It means simple or single. The idea behind this umbrella term of simplicity is the idea of being single-minded, single in your focus. Literally, Jesus is saying that if you have a single aim in life, if there is a simplicity of devotion to God, of living for the glory of God by the strength that God gives, that aim, that goal – you see, it’s vision – Jesus takes the eye and he personifies it to say if that is the driving principle of your life, you will be healthy and you are going to be in good shape. But if your eye, if your vision, if your desire of what you are seeking is not single, if you are duplicitous, if you have these mixed motives, if there are idols in your heart that rival affection to God, then the light itself will become darkness. Do you see it? And do you see the spiritual danger?

Just to confirm that that is clearly what Jesus is teaching, let’s just see how he develops the theme. No one can serve two masters. You cannot be duplicitous. I am here worshipping God, but what I really want is for you to notice how spiritual I am. “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” There is a fundamental battle that takes place where God must win and reign in our hearts.

What follows is a whole teaching about anxiety, and overcoming anxiety, and learning to trust God. I want you to see. I want you to make these important associations. We live with a single aim. We live with a simple devotion to glorify God, to live for him. Now, he adds to that or expands that teaching to include “by faith in God alone.” We live for him and by him.

So he talks about trusting and not being anxious because we trust in God. God clothes the lilies of the field and he is going to clothe us. He is going to take care of us. He develops this theme all the way to verse 33, where we read a verse that really captures the theme of this section. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” -- that simple call to devotion to God.

Paul develops this theme throughout this letters. He talks about being simply devoted to Christ. He talks of himself in 2 Corinthians 1:12. He says to the Corinthians, “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with (here is the word) simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.”

He is saying that we come to you in a very simple, single fashion, living for the glory of God by the grace of God, living for God by the strength that God gives us. The result of that is that we don't live by worldly wisdom. We have functioned with you relationally with sincerity. And Paul makes an important connection here -- that purity in relationship, sincerity in relationship comes from this one simple aim. People don't feel manipulated or controlled when we are governed by this one life principle to live for the glory of God. Because then there is a transparency that characterizes our lives, and we are set free to say, “I don't have to control you to be happy. My ultimate success is not your success. It's living for the glory of God and then watching what God will do in the situation.” One simple aim: Living for the glory of God, by God.

Now, before we leave this, let me just make this one observation. You look at Proverbs 31 and say, “Okay, Brian, you are saying that this woman, this ideal – she is doing one thing, one life-driving principle. But she is doing a lot. I mean, she has planted a vineyard. She's got a business. She is selling things. She is making things. She is raising kids. It sure seems like she is doing more than one thing. And there is the development of this wider vision, but I would argue it all flows from this one life principle, that God will give specificity to our lives and to the vision, his call, as we get this one simple thing right. The reason we say it's living for the glory of God by the strength that God gives is that we understand that we can't go out and do this on our own. We need the redemption that's found in Christ alone. Okay?”

II. She is complicated.

Alright? This will be brief. There is an aspect to the woman that's described here. You could develop it very easily (I'm just going to illustrate it in one or two ways) where she affirms the culture in which she lives, and another where she challenges the culture. The most obvious place where we would see it in relation to our own day is in verse 30. We are told that charm is deceitful and beauty is vain. This is a message to women that is very liberating.

There has been a lot of talk about women this election year. Obviously, one of the main candidates is a woman, and there has been a lot said about how women are viewed and treated. But there is something very liberating in this, where God is saying to you, “Ladies, your physical appearance is not the definition of who you are. That’s deceitful. It’s false advertising. It’s vain. It’s empty.” So there is a direct challenge to what the world would communicate to you about your significance and the root of your significance.

At the same time, you find in this passage references to how this woman dresses her children and herself. For example, in verse 22 we are told that her clothing is fine linen and purple. There is an attention to her appearance and to the beauty that is God-given. I think it illustrates wonderfully this complexity -- the complications that characterize a godly life. There is a place where we challenge what the world tells us and say, “No, that is not right.” Then there is a place where we would seem to commend it and say, “Yes.”

Remember, these are navigating principles. They help us. They provide direction for us. So you want to ask which way to lean, for example, on this whole beauty thing? Obviously I can’t give you a list of what’s appropriate and not appropriate, but when the sole, simple aim of your life is to glorify God, it gives us clarity and helps us know when to lean one direction or the other. There is a domestic quality to the woman who is described here, where she gloriously lives her life for the good of her family, and yet there is also this element where she is fully engaged in the world around her.

Now, what are the truths in scripture that create that tension and help us work through those complexities? One we have already talked about: Creation is good. We are made in the image of God. This is God’s world. The physical is not bad, and we affirm the beauty of God in the creation around us. But then we have also talked about the fact that creation is fallen, that sin has separated us from God. And these two truths hold us in a tension that helps us work through the complexities of life. They help us to see that when we meet people -- Christians, non-Christians, people of our race, people of different races, people of our culture, people of different cultures -- that there are things we see reflecting the image of God just like us, though maybe different because of the variety in creation. But then there are also areas just like us where we are fallen and in need of redemption. So we are not undone and disillusioned every time someone sins against us.

Parents, this is very helpful. Do you ever find yourself saying to your children, “I would never have spoken to my parents the way you speak to me”? Do you ever say that? I used to say that until one day my dad told me, “You spoke to me that way all the time.” And you know what? It’s the truth. I don’t know. There were dynamics to that relationship with my mom and my dad that are probably. It’s a different day. But, do you know what? I sinfully related to my parents, and at times they sinfully related to me.

The message that I want to get through to my children when they are disrespectful to me, or when they do things that are ungodly, I want to communicate the message: That dishonors God. That is sin. That is wrong. Jesus paid for it. You need to go to the cross, receive forgiveness, and do the battle there in faith in what Christ has done, so that the roots underneath the soil, pushing out that fruit -- the roots of pride and self-sufficiency and selfishness can be cut off. I am giving you this message, son or daughter, because the same fruit is in my life. Maybe it looks a little different but the same roots are in my life and the same need for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It’s there as the gospel is applied that we begin to enjoy the richness and the diversity and the complexities of life, so that I don’t have to say to moms, “Well, you have to fulfill your role just like this or just like that; you can’t do this or you can’t do that.” Those are very important questions that you must work out as you live for the glory of God by the strength that God gives you, then realizing that as the gospel is applied to your life, as the message of Jesus Christ is applied to your life -- that tension of sin and his provision, of common grace and special grace, of the beauty of creation and the good things in it, and the need for all of it to be redeemed – that’s worked out in your lives in glorious ways.

So we end with this, and I think this is an important final word. When Beth and I went to Africa to adopt Joshua and Caleb, I tried to tell Beth that I took more trips to Africa than she did that year, and that I really birthed Joshua and Caleb in adoption. So I birthed two of our children, she birthed four. She did not seem to think that that was a helpful comparison, and I would agree with her. It probably wasn’t as funny as I thought it was. But I did have this repeated sensation that set me free. I am being completely serious and I believe this will help, especially our moms. On the third trip, I was sitting in the Director of Social Welfare’s office. I had been to the American Embassy several times and they said, “Brian, we are not going to give you a visa to bring Joshua and Caleb

home. They are just too old. There are too many complications. The appearance of child trafficking is too big a concern.”

So here we are. Three trips to Africa. Money invested. Money borrowed. People praying. We have stirred up this anticipation. And I am sitting there, listening now to an official in West Africa tell me, “I don’t know that this is going to happen.” I remember thinking, “What if we fail?” Just by the grace of God I dismissed that thought and said “It doesn’t matter. I believe God called me to do this. I have to be faithful. It doesn’t matter if in the end we fail and have a bunch of debt and made a bunch of trips and it doesn’t happen. I have to trust God with the results. I want to live by the simplicity that I am trying to do this in my imperfect, flawed way for the glory of God.”

And I want to say to moms that if you believe the lie that you have to be successful, that your children have to turn out a certain way, that it will tempt you to idolatry. It will tempt you to where you are drawing a direct line from your parenting to their behavior, and the line is not direct. At best it’s indirect. No matter how good a parent you are, they need a savior. If they fail it will be heartbreaking, but God can be glorified and still work his miracles in your life and in their lives. It’s liberating for you just to sit there in that office of the Social Welfare Department in Accra, Ghana and say, “I am so out of my league, God. I have no idea what you are going to do, but I am just going to try to live for your glory and see what you will do.”

Now, I am happy to say that Joshua and Caleb have made me look a lot better than I am. Amen? I am happy to say it’s a wonderful success. Some of you have adopted. Some of you have married. Some of you have parented in many ways and you are saying, “Right now I don’t feel like a success.” I want to say, “Get a vision for living for the glory of God right in the mess you are in, and watch God work out the complexities of it by his gospel truth.” Amen.