

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

January 19, 2021

The Proverbs 31 Woman: Real or Ideal?

This proverb starts out promisingly with a beautiful question: *“An excellent wife who can find?”* It suggests that finding that “excellent wife” is very rare but if you are fortunate enough to find her, you are blessed beyond measure. Who would disagree with such a sentiment?

The description that follows does nothing to disabuse us of that point. The woman described there is remarkable in every way. She treats her husband like a king, she works from morning to night and is even a breadwinner for the household. Her kids are well-behaved — every day, they rise up from their beds praising her, praise is echoed by her husband who, apparently, is busy sitting with some of the older men in the city square. Of course, she is classy — she dresses well in scarlet and purple but these are clothes she sews for herself. She even sells some of them. When she speaks, everyone stops and listens. To top it all off, she takes care of the poor and is strong, confident and courageous — *she is the best wife and mother who ever lived!*

My first reaction to this proverb is simple: I’m glad there is not a “Proverbs 32” describing the “excellent husband”!

Like many preachers before me, I have made the mistake of preaching from this text, without disclaimers, on Mother’s Day. I naively thought the women would love it, and I was surprised when they left the assembly looking less joyful than they did when they came in.

Why was that? Isn’t it obvious? If this is the standard for an “excellent wife” then, with no offense meant to anyone (least of all my own excellent wife), I have never met an “excellent wife.” There may be some out there, but — I probably shouldn’t say this — I’m not at all sure I’d want to be married to one. Hear me out. This woman never stops. Verse 18 says, “her lamp does not go out at night” yet she also “rises while it is still night” (v. 15). No wonder: she has to provide everything for the household and, apparently, her husband is happy to let her do it (v. 11). She is cooking, sewing, buying, selling, helping the poor and needy, teaching and hardly ever, if ever, takes a break. She dares not eat “the bread of idleness” (v. 27). Just reading this proverb makes me tire. I’m not kidding. This woman puts all of us — men and women — to shame. That’s not an excuse to ignore it, but reading it incorrectly can cause a woman to feel inadequate. But it seems there is another way to interpret this that makes applying it more doable. When interpreted correctly, the opening line is as beautiful as it sounds. Let’s look at it.

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First, this text is in the book called “Proverbs.” By definition, a proverb is a statement that is *generally* true. I think we can take it a step further and say that some proverbs describe the ideal or perfect example of something or someone though often, those general truths or ideals are not met. Proverbs 12:4 says, “an excellent wife is the crown of her husband...” but that is not always the case. There are many wives who are “excellent” by any reasonable measure but their husbands do not appreciate them like they should. The point of that proverb is in its comparison to the last half of it: “...but she who brings shame is like rotteness to his bones.” As true as that sounds, some husbands couldn’t care less if their wives are shameless; they may even prefer it. Proverbs 31 is presenting an ideal. A better translation of 31:1 is probably “a *virtuous* (or ‘worthy’) woman who can find?” Translators use “excellent” perhaps because the text describes a woman who is not only principled and praiseworthy, but who also has skills and a strong work ethic. But “virtue” is the key here.*

I preach Proverbs 31 differently than I did in the past partly because I prefer that the wonderful women who attend at Folsom do not frown at me as they leave the building. More importantly, I preach it differently because I decided that the proverb is not a list for women to measure themselves against. After all, wives who can’t sew or knit or who are not engaging in real estate transactions would not qualify using this model. But that’s not the aim of the proverb. Instead, it seems to be the “composite excellent wife” — this fictional “wonder woman,” with her perfect attitude and superior skills, is presented as an ideal.

The best application of this proverb, then, seems to be to read it and ask, “I can’t do it all, but what can I do that this woman is doing?” In fact, there are several attributes mentioned here that all of us, men included, should aim for: the opening our hearts and hands to the poor and needy (v. 20), speaking with wisdom and kindness (v. 26) and a strong work ethic, summed up in v. 27, “do not eat the bread of idleness.” Those are not women-only ideals.

Wives should not beat themselves up — or give up — when they don’t meet the perfect standard laid out there. One thing is for sure: *“a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised”* (v. 30). That is much more praiseworthy than physical beauty or charm and the main point of the proverb.

*The only woman in the Bible who is actually called a virtuous, or worthy woman is Ruth; see Ruth 3:11.