

God Uses Us

Today's Old Testament lesson, from Proverbs 31, is an interesting description of the sorts of things wise, godly women do, and the impacts they have on those around them. Before we start reading the passage, I want us to have some background on it. The chapter opens by saying, "The sayings of King Lemuel – an inspired utterance his mother taught him," (Prov. 31:1). Has anyone ever heard of King Lemuel?

Most Bible scholars suggest it's another name for King Solomon. Most of us know who he was. So Solomon would have heard this from his mother, Bathsheba. Many of us know the tragic story of how Bathsheba and David came to know each other – it wasn't on the up and up.

Our God, though, takes us – flaws and all – and uses us to introduce a dying world to the Redeemer who laid His life down to free all of us. If you hear nothing else this morning, Church, hear this – God loves us, He died for us, and He expects us to spread that news. I want us to look together at Proverbs 31:10-31, and consider how a godly woman lives, and how that affects us. If you have your Bible, or Bible app handy, turn there with me. I'm reading from the New International Version this morning. **Read Proverbs 31:10-31.**

Wife of Noble Character

Solomon lists a lot of details about as he says, "a wife of noble character," (verse 10). Now, you know, people could take this literally. Guys could read this and say, "that's the kind of wife I'm going to look for to marry." Or flip it around, right? The ladies could say, "that's the kind of husband I want to marry."

Always keep in mind, though, when thinking about stuff from Solomon, his big request of God wasn't to have a godly wife – but to have wisdom. So these verses can also be viewed as a metaphor for wisdom. Since we're where we are in history, we could also view it through a lens that says, this is the true Church, the faithful bride of Christ, clinging to her Savior until the very end. Many Scriptures can be interpreted in multiple ways, that's what makes the Bible so neat. It really is the living word, which we come to and interpret based upon our reason, traditions, and personal experience.

We aren't going to get into a deep study of this today. We don't have the time to do that. So we'll go through it, and look at it through a somewhat more literal lens, where we think about various women throughout history who have fit this description. Solomon says she's worth more than rubies – in those days it was a very expensive gemstone that only the richest people could ever hope to possess – and then he goes

on to say that her husband has confidence in her and that she does great things, (verses 10-12, paraphrased).

Hard Working Women

The godly woman works hard, we're told – not once – but seven times in as many different verses. He gives descriptions of the hard work she does in verses 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 24. Hard work is a key thing here. There's an old quote, often attributed to Benjamin Franklin that says, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." I don't know if Franklin really said that, but the assumption we get from that quote is that the person being talked about is actively working in those waking hours. They aren't just watching Netflix all day long.

Another thing we read in this passage is that this ideal woman takes care of people. First in verse 15, and again in verse 20, where we read, "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy." See, she don't even know them, but she welcomes them. Friends, that's the Church. The Church welcome the poor, the lost, the needy – and gives them hope – or at least that's what she ought to be doing. She also spares no expense to take care of her people. "Her household [is] clothed in scarlet," (verse 21), "she is clothed in fine linen and purple," (verse 22), and "she makes linen garments, sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes," (verse 24).

These scarlet and purple colors mentioned – they're colors used even today to signify royalty and wealth. What else is scarlet? The blood of Christ! The household of God is clothed in Jesus' blood – don't ever forget that! This woman being described in Proverbs – is respected by her family (verses 28 and 29) – and even by strangers.

Deborah and Joan of Arc

She's strong and powerful. We're told, "she is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come," (verse 25). And she's wise. "She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue," (verse 26). The writer closes with an important reminder: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate," (verses 30-31).

These are some virtues of the godly woman which Solomon describes – diligence, wisdom, kindness, strength, and faithfulness. Now, let's think about some historical women who have those same character traits. The first one which comes to mind is Deborah. She's a Bible heroine, found in Judges 4-5. She's one of the first examples of female leadership in the Bible. Deborah was a prophetess and judge who led Israel with courage and wisdom, much like the woman described in Proverbs 31. She balanced leadership with faithfulness to God, and guided her people to victory and peace.

In the Middle Ages, in France, a young peasant girl by the name of Joan of Arc felt the call of God on her life. She felt called by God to lead her country to freedom during the Hundred Years' War with England. Despite the odds, her unwavering faith and bravery empowered her to guide the French armies, and inspired a nation. Even today, she is a national heroine of France, though ironically, she was burned at the stake around age 19 on orders from the Church. I include this, because hindsight is always 20/20, and sometimes, even acting as the Church, we still get things wrong.

Leadership in Hard Times

Hitting a little closer to home, in the mid-1800's, a lady by the name of Sojourner Truth gained fame – and in some circles, notoriety – here in the United States. She was born into slavery, but became a powerful abolitionist and women's rights activist. Her words and actions embodied the qualities of speaking with wisdom and standing for justice. Her leadership in the face of oppression speaks to a strength rooted deeply in her faith in Jesus Christ.

If you listened to the debate last week, you heard them talking about Ukraine. Conflicts in that part of the world are nothing new. Back in the 1850's or so, Russia tried to take over the Crimean peninsula – which it did again in 2014 – in what became known as the Crimean War. In that war during the 1850's, Russia fought against a coalition consisting of England, France, Italy, and Turkey. Ultimately it ended in a stalemate.

But out of that conflict, another woman became famous – Florence Nightingale. Today she's remembered as the mother of modern nursing. During the Crimean War, she led efforts to improve medical care and hygiene to the wounded soldiers on the front lines. Her diligence and compassion for men she didn't even know, as she tended them in their injuries and illnesses reflects the heart of the woman in Proverbs 31, who cares for her family and the wider community.

Women Who Lead

Mother Teresa's another example. She was a Nobel Peace Prize recipient who dedicated her life to serving the poor and sick in the streets of Calcutta, India. She died five days after the untimely death of Princess Di, and most of the news stations didn't say a whole lot about her passing. Mother Teresa demonstrated humility, tireless work, and dedication to God's call. She is the epitome of selflessness and service seen in Proverbs 31.

Rosa Parks is yet another example. She was a key figure in the civil rights movement, and is most remembered for her quiet strength and firm belief in justice. Her actions demonstrate real life application of the courage and conviction of the Proverbs 31 woman, who "laughs without fear of the future," (verse 25). And if you

think about it, there are others – there are multiple Proverbs 31 women who have nurtured us in our families, our career paths, and in our faith journeys.

There are several of the saints from New Hope who fit that category, and some of them are still living, and present with us this morning. Each of these women exemplify leadership, service, and strength, grounded in their faith in Jesus Christ. They had – or have – a desire to impact the world for good. And while we frame this as a topic about women, it applies to the men, too. We should all be encouraged to reflect on these godly characteristics in our lives, and recognize how we are called to lead and to serve – regardless of our circumstances!

Prayer: O God, Wisdom of the universe, You bear the pain of Your people. Grant us the gift of wisdom, that we may discern Your way and live justly and graciously amid the struggles of this world. Amen.