

Women's Bible Study – Fall 2007
WOMEN IN TRANSITION

Proverbs 31 Woman: Superwoman or Role Model?

November 28, 2007

Gretchen Steer



With Proverbs 31 we come to the end of our series on *Women in Transition*. We've looked at women as different as Leah and Athaliah; Mary and Tamar; the widow Anna and Queen Esther. As different as their stories are, the one common thread they share is that while their lives were in transition, God was not. He remained sufficient for their needs, as he is for ours.

But today we come to someone who makes us nervous...the nearly perfect Mrs. Proverbs 31. Now it's not unusual for women to turn to a literary figure for help. In past generations, women often looked to their cookbooks. Here is a copy of Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, which was more or less the bible of housekeeping in 19th century England. I came of age with *Betty Crocker*. This cookbook is well used, since I've had it for 30 years. We used to say "Get the Betty" in a moment of crisis...if you wanted to know what to do in a kitchen fire, or how to keep gravy from getting lumpy, or whether the knife blade faces towards the plate or away in a table setting. But the Proverbs 31 woman is a much better guide than either Mrs. Beeton or Betty, because her life demonstrates not just outward skill, but inner beauty.

With today's passage we come to a woman who has generated a lot of strong feelings. My husband said the other day, "My mother always hated that woman. She despised the fact that the Proverbs 31 wife sounded like a smug, patronizing perfectionist and felt she couldn't live up to her standard." I realize that my mother in law Charlotte is not here to defend herself, but I do definitely remember her saying, "Oh, I suppose you're all going to rise up and call me blessed now" in a tone of voice that implied "that could NEVER happen in this household." This passage discouraged her, because she felt she couldn't measure up. Yet Charlotte was more like the Proverbs 31 woman than most.

So friends, relax. I'm here to tell you that if you feel uncomfortable, deficient, inadequate or whatever as you read this passage, that you need not. The Proverbs 31 woman is a composite – an idealized description of the best that woman can be in this fallen world. The passage was written in Hebrew as an acrostic poem, so that each stanza began with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It was used to teach children her virtues.

Proverbs 31:10-31 refers to a wife, in the sense that it begins "**A wife of noble character who can find?**" (v. 10) However, I don't think I'm out of line biblically in applying it to all of us, single or married. You see, the fact that she is a wife is almost irrelevant to who she is and what she does. Her goodness and her achievements spill outward and benefit her family. But in the same way, the goodness of a single woman can spill over and bless all who come in contact with her – her brothers and sisters in Christ, her relatives, her co workers. But you are who you are outwardly because of what you are

inwardly. Because God's word praises this woman's internal life, we should emulate her whether or not we are married.

So start by turning with me to Proverbs 31, beginning with verse 10:

**"A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.**

**Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.
She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.**

She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.

She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

In her hands she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.

She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

**Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:
'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.'**

**Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is
to be praised.**

**Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the
city gate. (Proverbs 31:10-31)**

When you hear it all read together, it almost sounds like one of those awful Christmas letters where people go on and on about their family's achievements.

Now listen to one woman's take on being a modern day Proverbs 31 woman:

His coworkers are jealous
because I mow the lawn;
They think I cook, can, and clean
from dusk to dawn.

I do pay the bills
and plan the yearly budget;
but come June or July,
I am ready to fudge it!

When he comes home from work
I try not to hide,
I tell him my strength and beauty
is all found inside!

My children are not dressed
in purple and red,
They have hand-me-downs and holes
in their jeans instead.

The words that I speak
are not often wise,
the kids might even say
I'm a witch in disguise.

The kids holler, "MOM"
My husband yells, "HONEY,"
If this is being blessed,
Someone was being funny.

Seriously, I give what I can
to those in need,
I pray that my faith

is shown by my deed.

I may not be perfect;
only noble in heart,
The Lord will I fear and
from him never depart.

Let's look now at this passage in two ways...first, by examining what God sees in her, and then by asking what others see about this woman.

I. What God Sees

Thank goodness that God sees the heart, and the motivation. Here are four things which the Bible suggests God might find praiseworthy in the Proverbs 31 woman.

The first is

A. Diligence (v. 13-19, 21-22, 24, 27)

That very tirelessness is what annoys us most about the Proverbs 31 woman, I think. She works with fabrics (v. 13); she gets up while it is still dark (v. 15); she apparently never sleeps, because her lamp does not go out at night. But we are on the outside looking in. God sees that her unflinching diligence and her hard work spring from a desire to please him.

Proverbs is essentially a book of practical wisdom about how to live. It was authored by King Solomon, a man notoriously unwise about women. In fact, there are really only two kinds of women depicted in Proverbs...Wisdom, personified as a woman in Proverbs 8, and folly, also personified as a woman in Proverbs 7. The way of folly leads to death. But the way of Wisdom leads to life. Then we reach the end of the book of Proverbs, and see that the Proverbs 31 woman is what wisdom looks like with flesh and blood and clothes on. She is wisely diligent in providing for her family. She is wisely diligent in working hard, because that gives rewards in the present and future. She is wisely diligent in spending her time, so that boredom doesn't draw her into sin. So since we know that God values this woman, then we need to accept that diligence is part of what he values about her.

We also see

B. Compassion (v. 20)

“She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.” (v. 20)

This woman is doing well financially. She's running a business; she's buying, selling, making cloth and so on, and her children are clothed in scarlet...the best. But with all these resources, she doesn't just keep them to herself or use them for her family...she opens her arms to the poor. The prophet Amos talks about justice, **“Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts...”** (Amos 5:15) and abhors what Israel does to the poor: **“You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them...”** (Amos 5:11)

God cares about the poor and the needy. He expects us to do what we can to alleviate the material suffering of others. And, it's clear, we will be held to account for ignoring them. Think of the parable of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus says at the end **"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."** (Matthew 25: 40).

God approves of the Proverbs 31 woman and the way that she doesn't hoard her resources for herself.

From God's perspective it is shameful if we ourselves have the best of everything, and yet those around us do not have enough. And our responsibility extends not just to those we see in front of us, but to those around the world who go to bed with hungry bellies.

There are so many ways we can help right now – by giving time, by ringing a bell at a Salvation Army kettle, by donating money, by spending less and giving more. God values her trait of compassion, as one who sees the need for justice and responds to it.

Then there is

C. Dignity (v. 25)

"She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come." (v. 25)

We think of dignity as the silverhaired, well-dressed gentleman with impeccable clothing and manners...someone who commands the room when they enter it. But dignity literally refers *to bearing, conduct, or speech indicative of self-respect*. In other words, dignity means knowing who you are, and not being ashamed of it. The slave, Tom, showed dignity as he was being beaten to death while asking God's forgiveness for his killers in the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Mother Teresa had dignity as she moved among the slums of Calcutta.

Dignity doesn't happen when you respect others less. It occurs when you respect yourself more. The only true and lasting self respect, the only true unchanging dignity we can have is from understanding that our worth comes from Christ. He graciously gives us back the ability to respect ourselves by giving us a remedy for sin and shame, which are the very things that eat away at a sense of self respect and dignity.

"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God?" (Hebrews 9:14)

The reason the Proverbs 31 woman can "laugh at the days to come" is that she knows she is in God's hands. And so can we hold up our heads and laugh at the days to come, when we know that our consciences have been cleansed forever by the blood of Christ. Now that is TRUE dignity – dignity that comes from God.

Next is

D. Wisdom (v. 26; 30)

I've talked about this woman being the personification of Wisdom, which we can see because she is wise in her actions. But remember that God is looking at her heart, so he approves her

wise attitude in verse 30. **“A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” (v. 30)** Fear of the Lord is one of the biblical definitions of wisdom: **“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” (Proverbs 1:7)** She’s wise, because she understands who God is and has a proper awe towards him.

So when God looks at her he sees her on the inside: her diligence, her compassion, her dignity, and her wisdom. But we can also tell quite a bit about her by observing what she does and how others treat her.

II. What Others See

A. Benefits to her family (v. 11-12; 23; 28)

Imagine growing up in a household where this woman was your mom. You’d never have to worry about what to put on in cold weather, because there were all your warm clothes waiting for you. And she didn’t buy them at Kohl’s...she raised the sheep, sheared the fleece, spun the wool and sewed the clothes. There was always food on the table, because she had prepared it, and because she could afford it. And what benefits for her husband, who is famous locally because of his wonderful wife! She does him good and not harm all the days of his life. What a contrast to some of the other wives depicted in Proverbs...like the one whose nagging is like a dripping tap (Proverbs 19:13).

My point is that her internal life, the relationship with God that produces diligence, compassion, dignity and wisdom, spills over into her relationships with others. They benefit because of who she is. She cannot hide it.

But it’s not just her family who benefits, because she also provides

B. Blessing to others (v. 15; 20)

There is an awful lot of discussion about her weaving fabrics, selling them, making clothes and so on. Clothing the household took a huge amount of labor, and some sort of fabric was always in the hands of these women.

So perhaps to relate to her we need to think of what we do day in and day out, like keeping our family on schedule, fed and dressed. Maybe our modern equivalent to her fabric is our car...how many of us spend hours each day driving our kids places? She always had cloth in her hands; we’ve always got a steering wheel. We may not be spinning and making clothes, but we are doing the modern equivalents... grocery shopping, laundry, banking, working for a paycheck.

I also want to note that this woman, while home based, was actually conducting business in the community. So again, our model today should include women who are working outside the home as well as inside. And her willingness to look beyond her immediate family to her servants and the poor and the community meant that others were blessed by her inner life as well – by those characteristics of diligence, compassion, dignity and wisdom whose effects spill over into the lives of others.

We've taken a brief look at the Proverbs 31 woman. She does rather sound like Wonder Woman, doesn't she? So let's look next at

III. What God Wants from Us Wonder Women

These days most organizations have mission statements. Autumn Ridge Church is no exception. We say that our mission is "Loving God, serving people." How about a personal mission statement? Can you name the two or three things that God has put you on this earth to do right now? Mine is very simple. I stole it from Paul: "I want to follow Christ." What is yours? To help you think of your personal mission statement, consider these points drawn from Proverbs 31 about what God wants most from us.

First, he wants

A. Excellence, not perfectionism.

I've wrestled a lot with this passage over the years. I memorized Proverbs 31 when I was younger and at that time I saw nothing wrong with trying to attain to her standards. Notice I said "attain" not "achieve"! But now I've come to the conclusion that while I can admire her, I cannot BE her. But that does not mean that I'm giving up. I am convinced that God is calling us to a much higher standard of service. Like Paul in Colossians, we have to say **"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."** (Col. 3:24)

I believe that God is calling us to excellence, not perfectionism.

Let's define those terms. Excellence is striving to give your best at all times. Perfectionism is not being satisfied unless the task is done perfectly. Do you see the difference? The first standard, excellence, looks at HOW you do something. The second standard, perfectionism, only looks at WHAT you've done.

The first standard calls you to absolutely do your best. Most days, giving your best means that you will be working tirelessly, diligently in fact, (like the Proverbs 31 woman) at the tasks God has given you. Excellence understands that the outcome is God's business, but the labor is ours, done in his strength. Excellence is a standard which allows you to look yourself in the eye without shame, while simultaneously permitting you to rest in God. He'll take what you've done and make it into something glorious, if that is what he wills. Or he might not. But we will have discharged our responsibility by doing what he's set for us with all the excellence we are capable of. That standard will vary from person to person, but each of us should know, if we're honest, whether we are giving excellence to God. **"Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load."** (Gal. 6:4-5)

The second standard, perfectionism, means that you are the person responsible for the outcome. If you don't do your absolute best, if it's not perfect, you will be disappointed. In yourself. In others. In life.

I'm convinced that perfectionism has more to do with Satan than with God, because perfectionism is a way of making ourselves be like God. Because we are made in God's image, and our creative abilities come from him, we can think of ourselves as sub-creators. But we cannot set ourselves up to be CREATORS, that is, taking all the credit and bearing all the responsibility for what we do. The perfectionist refuses to acknowledge God's hand and therefore sets herself up as a rival to God. So there is a sin of pride underlying perfectionism.

The next pitfall is that perfectionism keeps us from doing anything useful. It's a crippling mindset that says, "If I can't do it perfectly, I'm not going to try." The bottom line is that we will be unwilling to risk anything for God – any new service, change, or commitment...if we cannot afford to fail.

So how do we can tell the difference between excellence and perfectionism? Externally they look a lot alike. But in the same way that the inner character of diligence, compassion, dignity and wisdom "leaks out", so will the inner attitude of perfectionism. It says "I can't try that; I'm not good enough." "I'm too busy to do that job well."

Now please understand me. I am not talking about the rare time when we honestly admit we can't carry a tune, or know enough math to balance a budget, or whatever your particular weakness is. I am talking about a chronic, across the board refusal to try ANYTHING that stretches us, particularly when it comes to Christian service. If you recall our study of spiritual gifts, it was clear from the scriptures that God unexpectedly gifted men and women for a particular situation of need. All they had to do was acquiesce – agree – try. But perfectionism won't let us even try.

I thought it was wonderful a few weeks ago when we put out a plea for help with the audio visual equipment in the evening Bible study. I had three women step up and agree to try to learn it. The result is that the work is shared, women are blessed, and God equips. I am personally terrified of the sound board. But I also knew that I had to learn how to run it. I'm so grateful that three women saw the need, were willing to be trained, and stepped up. Perfectionism won't let us take on those new challenges. It whispers to us that we'll fail.

When we look at the Proverbs 31 woman, think in terms of excellence, not perfectionism. And the reason I know she's practicing excellence and not perfectionism is by her motivation. She fears the Lord (v. 30). She has a holy awe of God, a "loving reverence that includes submission to his lordship and to the commands of his word." (NIV Footnotes on Proverbs 1:7). She is a woman doing what God told her to do, not what she is internally driven to accomplish.

A second thing that God wants us to have is

B. Perception, not pigheadedness.

By this I mean that he wants us to be women receptive to his word and his Spirit. We see this in her life in her interactions with others: **"She brings him [her husband] good, and not harm, all the days of her life." (v. 12). "She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy." (v. 20). "She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue." (26) "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting,**

but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” (v. 30). This sounds like Peter’s description of an ideal woman: **“Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” (1 Peter 3:3-4)**

We see by her actions that this woman understands what God wants of her – to bless others. Her internal compassion and dignity ooze out to comfort those around her. Now we cannot have that kind of rich internal life unless we are perceptive towards God and not pigheadedly pursuing our own desires and goals. And being perceptive towards God means that we are not so busy that we cannot hear his voice.

Let’s switch gears a moment. When you think of the word saunter, doesn’t it conjure up a sort of leisurely approach to life? A pace at which it is possible to hear God’s voice? Well, here is an explanation of its origin, written by John Muir:

“Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter?' It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, "**A la sainte terre, 'To the Holy Land.'** And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers.” (John Muir, quoted by Albert Palmer in *A Parable of Sauntering*)

When we are pigheadedly pursuing our own goals, we cannot be perceptive towards God and his desires for us. We have to saunter a bit, literally, toward holy or heavenly land, so that we can perceive his voice speaking to us.

**Finally God wants us to have
C. Wisdom, not folly.**

Most of the book of Proverbs is about what constitutes wisdom vs. folly. The woman of Proverbs 31 is no different. She personifies wisdom, and shows us the reward that comes when we live with wisdom. Her life is blessed materially (although that’s not guaranteed) and her life is blessed emotionally with love and respect. So there are good reasons to pursue wisdom.

How do we obtain wisdom? James tells us: **“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5)** Then James tells us how we’ll know when we have wisdom: **“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” (James 3:13).** Sounds pretty easy, right? First we ask, and then we live according to it.

I think that’s what the Proverbs 31 woman did. She asked for wisdom, and then she lived by it. So if you’ve been thinking about your personal mission statement, what God is calling you to do in this life, consider those three things: excellence, perception, and wisdom.

As it is the last lecture of the fall, I'd like to close with one final rustic camping story. I promise I'll think of something else to talk about in the next series... at least until we go on the next leg of the John Muir trail, which is planned for September 2008.

Before our backpacking trip this summer there was a flurry of emails among my siblings, exchanging advice about what equipment to bring. Virtually everyone endorsed the purchase of a pair or two of Ex Officio underwear. Their advertising reads "Seventeen countries...three weeks...two pairs of underwear." You are supposed to wash one pair out at night and voila, it's dry by morning. So I obediently purchased some and took them on this trip, where we referred to them as "magic underwear".

However, it wasn't until 5:30 am in the pitch dark the morning of our backpacking trip that I tried to put them on for the first time. Squirring around inside my small tent, I concluded that they were functional but not overly comfortable. It wasn't until much later in the day that I discovered I had put them on with one leg through the waist hole and the other through a leg hole, so the other leg opening was around my waist. Apparently it wasn't just that good camping food that was making them feel snug. But the amazing thing was that they really were pretty comfortable that way. So I concluded that what made magic underwear magic was that you could wear them the way I was wearing them the first day, turn them one third to the right the next day, wear them again, turn them again, and so on. And my sister Tina pointed out that after three days' use, you could turn them inside out and start all over again, resulting in six days' total wear. No wonder they call 'em magic underwear!

It's probably clear from this story that the magic underwear did not live up to its magic reputation. But I have to be fair and say that it DID live up to its advertising. You really could wash them in freezing river water, dry them on a rock and find them perfectly sanitary and wearable in a couple of hours. So maybe what we need to do with the Proverbs 31 woman is to look beyond her reputation as superwoman, ignore her perfection, and conclude that she had the important stuff: excellence, perception and wisdom. I'll take that over being perfect any day. And I'll take my Ex Officio underwear on my next backpacking trip, knowing that they're useful instead of magic.

Women's Bible Study
*Women in Transition: Proverbs 31 Woman
Role Model or Superwoman?*
November 28, 2007

Discussion Questions

1. Does this passage inspire you or irritate you? Why?
2. From the description of this woman, would you conclude that she works primarily inside or outside the home? Does what we do for a living matter to God? Why or why not?
3. This woman affects those around her in a positive way. How can we as modern women give grace to those around us?

Women's Bible Study
Women in Transition: Proverbs 31 Woman
Role Model or Superwoman?
November 28, 2007

Intensive Study Questions

Memorize this scripture: “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” (Proverbs 31:30)

Please support your answers with scripture. You can use any passage of the Bible that pertains to your discussion of these questions.

1. Who wrote this passage? Is it intended to describe a real woman, or an idealized one? Using the chart below, write down her actions and her attributes with their references.

| Her Actions | Her Attributes | Verse Reference |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | Noble character | v. 10 |
| | Confidence inspiring | v. 11 |
| Brings good, not harm | | v. 12 |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

2. How do her attitudes towards others mimic God's attitudes? For example, what is her attitude towards the needy? What is God's attitude towards the needy? Now think of at least three other examples in the text where her attitudes mimic God's.
3. Compare the Proverbs 31 woman to the passage in 1st Peter 3:1-6. What do these descriptions share? What is different? Can these passages be applied to single women as well as married?
4. Does the Proverbs 31 woman work outside her home? What guidance does the Bible give us as we make choices about our work – i.e., what we do, how many hours, whether we are employed for pay outside the home?
5. If you had to sum up the entire message of these 21 verses in one sentence, what would you say?
6. Does her material success have anything to do with God's blessing? Why or why not?