

## **Finding an Excellent Wife**

### Proverbs 31:10-31

Today we are going to look at the passage that can be intimidating and even demoralizing to women who sincerely want to please God: Proverbs 31. Verse 10 asks the question, “An excellent wife, who can find?” The following 21 verses describe in some detail what is meant by “an excellent wife.” If you read these verses as a checklist of qualities that a wife is supposed to have, you might conclude that nobody can find an excellent wife.

The more I study Proverbs in general and Proverbs 31 in particular, the less this chapter seems like a checklist and the more it seems like a fitting conclusion to the entire book of Proverbs. Let me explain what I mean.

As we’ve seen, the book of Proverbs is largely written from a father to his son. Throughout Proverbs, the father has been very concerned about his son’s relationship with women. Chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7 each contain instruction about avoiding adulterous or immoral women. As well, there are also comments throughout Proverbs about undesirable women/wives. Here is a sampler of comments about the pitfalls of marrying the wrong type of woman.

12:4 An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,  
But she who shames him is like rottenness in his bones.

14:1 The wise woman builds her house,  
But the foolish tears it down with her own hands.

21:9 It is better to live in a corner of a roof  
Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.

21:19 It is better to live in a desert land  
Than with a contentious and vexing woman.

By the time we get to Proverbs 31, there is a question that this young man must be asking himself: “An excellent wife, who can find?” After everything that’s been said about the types of women to avoid, this is a valid question . . . the very question that Proverbs 31 answers.

Proverbs 31 basically says that an excellent wife is one who embodies the things that the book of Proverbs has been urging upon everyone – the son included. An excellent wife “fears the Lord” and therefore seeks after and finds wisdom.

In light of this understanding of Proverbs 31, this message is going to have a more narrow focus than most sermons I preach. This message will be aimed at you young men who might someday seek a wife. I’d like to implant in your heads and hearts some foundational ideas about the type of person you should seek to marry. Deciding whom to marry is one of the most significant decisions you will ever make in your life. Unless you are very clear about the type of person you want to marry, chances are that you’ll simply marry the best looking, most charming woman who will marry you. This passage should make clear that there are deeper issues to consider!

Of course, everybody else is free to listen in on this discussion. I realize you'll each hear this message in light of your marital status and stage in life – if you're an unmarried woman, a married woman, a married man, a parent with children who might one day get married. The main thing to keep in mind is that this is a composite, idealized portrait of wisdom embodied in a wife. Nobody perfectly lives out these things; we are all in process. Proverbs 31 ultimately shows the beauty and goodness of fearing the Lord.

The last thing I'll say before we wade out into this chapter is that I realize that this emphasis on the son avoiding one type of woman and seeking out another type of woman sounds terribly one-sided. I would simply remind you that ancient Israel was a patriarchal society. And so a father urging his son to pursue wisdom, to avoiding women who don't pursue wisdom, and to marry a woman who fears the Lord was a very appropriate way to communicate in that culture. I can only imagine how Proverbs would read if it were written from a mother to her daughter and described the types of men she should avoid. Instead of being 31 chapters long, it would probably be 62 chapters long. The application obviously goes both ways.

[Verses 10 through 31 form a Hebrew acrostic: the first word in each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. This may have been done to make this poem easier to memorize, or it may have been a way of communicating that this poem speaks of the ABCs of wisdom.]

***The value of “an excellent wife”(10-12) (NIV “a wife of noble character”)***

10 An excellent wife, who can find?  
For her worth is far above jewels.

Proverbs has already told us that it *is* possible to find “an excellent wife” or “a wife of noble character” (NIV). Proverbs 19:14 tells us that:

14 House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers,  
But a prudent wife is from the LORD.

An excellent wife is a gift from God. But the question in 31:10 is asked in such a way as to imply that such a wife is rather rare; not everybody does find such a wife. We'll see why that is the case as we go along. What is said here of “an excellent wife” has already been said of wisdom twice in Proverbs (3:15, 8:11): she is worth more than jewels/rubies. This is a way of indicating that an excellent wife is a woman who embodies wisdom.

11 The heart of her husband trusts in her,  
And he will have no lack of gain.  
12 She does him good and not evil  
All the days of her life.

This is one of the few mentions of the husband in this poem. The character of the wife is emphasized. She is the type of woman that her husband can trust; she is nothing but blessing to him.

This description of the virtuous woman is in sharp contrast to the adulterous woman we read about back to chapter 7. There the woman seduced a young man to enter her bedroom when her husband was away on business. That man's heart was not able to trust his wife; she introduced evil into their home instead of goodness. By contrast, the "excellent wife" can be trusted; she does not break covenant with him. She is a source of goodness and not evil.

As we progress through this chapter, it becomes obvious that this wife is managing a rather affluent and complex household. This is one reason I would take this to be less a prescription ("Every wife should do these things.") and more of a description ("This is how wisdom manifests itself in this household."). This isn't meant to be a checklist for a wife. I really don't know anybody who does everything that's listed here. This is a portrait of a wise wife managing a household with servants and children in ancient Israel. It will look different here in Kansas.

Let's now consider the character qualities that we see described in this woman. These are qualities that the book of Proverbs has already urged upon *everybody*; they are here applied to a wife in an affluent household. And so, young men, as you think about the prospect of a wife with these virtues, understand that the father in the book of Proverbs has already urged these virtues upon his son. You need these same virtues in your life.

***The character of "an excellent wife":***

***Industrious (13-15, 22-24)***

13 She looks for wool and flax  
And works with her hands in delight.  
14 She is like merchant ships;  
She brings her food from afar.  
15 She rises also while it is still night  
And gives food to her household  
And portions to her maidens.

This is the picture of a woman who is industrious in providing for her household. The wool and flax in verse 13 are probably used to make clothes. In comparing her to "merchant ships" in verse 14 the intent is probably to emphasize how abundantly she secures food for her household. Verse 15 says that "she rises also while it is still night" to give food to her household and maidens. If you're not "a morning person" you probably cringe when you read this verse. Your industriousness may look very different from what's described here.

Down in verses 22-24 we have other examples of her industry:

22 She makes coverings for herself;  
Her clothing is fine linen and purple.  
23 Her husband is known in the gates,  
When he sits among the elders of the land.  
24 She makes linen garments and sells them,  
And supplies belts to the tradesmen.

Here we see that the woman is engaged in business pursuits. She not only makes clothes for herself (purple indicated “wealth and high rank” Ross, p. 1132); she also makes “linen garments” and sells them to merchants. (Lydia was a “seller of purple fabrics”- Acts 16:14).

I think the intent is to paint a picture of industriousness in contrast to the laziness that is warned against throughout Proverbs. Last week we read this in 12:27:

27 A lazy man does not roast his prey,  
But the precious possession of a man is diligence.

Proverbs 31 tells us that diligence/industriousness is also a precious possession of a woman. You’re asking for trouble if you marry someone who is allergic to hard work. It is a very demanding thing to manage a household.

### ***Financially savvy (16-18)***

16 She considers a field and buys it;  
From her earnings she plants a vineyard.  
17 She girds herself with strength  
And makes her arms strong.  
18 She senses that her gain is good;  
Her lamp does not go out at night.

This woman being described is a shrewd businesswoman (see Ross, *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1131). On her own, she evaluates a piece of land and decides to buy it; from previous earnings, she plants a vineyard and works like crazy to turn a profit. We would say that she “burns the midnight oil.” And she senses that what she has done is good. Personally, I’m incredibly impressed; I’ve never invested in land and turned a profit off of it.

Again, I don’t think these verses are demanding that **every** wife be a shrewd businesswoman, although it certainly suggests it as an option. Opportunity, skill, need, and a woman’s bent all influence whether or not a wife can and should pursue such business ventures. But the broader category is financial management. This portrait of “an excellent wife” is consistent with everything else that Proverbs has to say about stewardship and how a person should manage his/her money. How a person handles money affects everything. I can’t tell you how much grief enters into a household when a wife (or a husband for that matter) is not wise in relation to finances. Few things affect the entirety of your life the way money does.

When Brenda and I first got married I figured that I’d keep the checkbook – being the man and all. After about six months Brenda asked me whether I’d balanced the checkbook. Since I hadn’t, I turned over the checkbook to Brenda for good. She’s much more of a detail person than I am; Brenda pays our bills and manages 90% of our budget. Again, I can hardly express how much security there is in having a wife that handles money and possessions wisely. Not everyone grows up being taught how to do this; this is something that many people have to learn later in life. That’s why we offer the GoodSense course here at Faith.

***Generous toward the poor (19-21)***

19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff,  
And her hands grasp the spindle.  
20 She extends her hand to the poor,  
And she stretches out her hands to the needy.  
21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household,  
For all her household are clothed with scarlet.

The book of Proverbs says what the rest of the Bible says: our attitude toward the poor really reflects our attitude toward God (see also Psalm 112:9). Three weeks ago Lowell preached on this topic. We looked at Proverbs 14:31:

31 He who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker,  
But he who is gracious to the needy honors Him.

It may not occur to you to discuss your attitude toward the poor with someone you're thinking about marrying. But this issue is significant because the person who is generous toward the poor has a heart that is soft toward God. One of the reasons God blesses a household with abundance is so that they it can overflow to meet the needs of those who have less.

***Virtuous (25-27)*** Several virtues are mentioned in these verses:

25 Strength and dignity are her clothing,  
And she smiles at the future.  
26 She opens her mouth in wisdom,  
And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.  
27 She looks well to the ways of her household,  
And does not eat the bread of idleness.

Verse 25 paints the picture of a woman who is secure: she is full of strength and dignity and isn't afraid of the future. Verse 26 presupposes that she is full of wisdom herself and therefore able to speak wisdom to others. She doesn't do so harshly; she teaches with "kindness." This reflects what Proverbs advocates about wisdom and speech. It's not enough to have knowledge; you have to be able to communicate it graciously.

In Proverbs 1 the father urges the son to remember the teaching of both his father and his mother. He wants his son to marry the type of woman who will one day pass on the truth to their children (as well as to others). This woman will not only be his wife; should God give them children, she will be his children's mother. That is certainly something that young men should keep in mind as they seek a wife.

***The reward of an excellent wife:  
Praise from her children and husband (28-29)***

28 Her children rise up and bless her;  
Her husband also, and he praises her, saying:  
29 "Many daughters have done nobly,

But you excel them all."

There are few things more satisfying for a wife and mother than to have her children and husband "rise up and bless/praise her." The opinion of those who know you best is what really matters. Her husband's estimation in verse 29 is superlative. The original goal was to "find a wife of noble character" (v. 10); here the husband says that many daughters/women have attained that, but that his wife exceeds them all.

### ***A good reputation (31)***

30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,  
But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.  
31 Give her the product of her hands,  
And let her works praise her in the gates.

Throughout Proverbs, we are told things like:

22:1 A good name is to be more desired than great wealth,  
Favor is better than silver and gold.

This woman has a good name in her community. She is known as one who excels in what she has set her hands to do. It's fascinating to study what the Scriptures say about a person's reputation. On the one hand, there are times when our reputations will suffer when we do what is right. But on the whole, the Scriptures indicate that a person's reputation generally reflects a person's true character. If you live in a community long enough, people will eventually form an opinion of you that is generally accurate. That's why elders are to be men who have a good reputation (1 Timothy 3:7). The young man who is considering a spouse should take into account her reputation.

### ***The "heart" of an excellent wife: she fears the Lord (v. 30)***

30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,  
But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.

In effect, this father is telling his son not to marry the most charming, best looking woman who will marry him. A woman can be very charming and very beautiful but not have the praise of her husband and children. "But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." This is the main thing we need to know about the woman described in Proverbs 31 and the main thing that you need to look for when you are looking for a wife: the fear of the Lord. Her deepest commitment is to know God and align her life with His. This should be true for every single one of us here today.

In conclusion, I need to say the obvious: boys/men, if you find a woman like I've just described, she isn't going to marry just anybody. She probably won't marry somebody who lacks these qualities in his life. And so you need to be becoming the type of man with whom such a woman would want to spend the rest of her life. You need to be a man who is full of the fear of the Lord.