

The Woman Who Feels the Lord: Proverbs 31:10-31
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday morning, May 11th, 2008 (Mother's Day)

Today is Mother's Day, and I would like us to look at Proverbs 31 and see the characteristics of a woman who fears the Lord. I haven't preached a Mother's Day sermon in the past, and I don't plan on doing this each year. But I'm excited for us to look at this together, and I pray that it will be beneficial to all of us. Before we even read the text, I want to tell you that this passage of Scripture is important for everyone here. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." This is God's Word, and it's inspired by God, and it's essential for our spiritual growth—for all of us.

This passage in Proverbs 31 speaks of a woman who is a wife and a mother. But this is a portrait of godly femininity that *all* women should strive for. Whether you are married or not, whether you have children or not, *all* women should be striving to be a woman who fears the Lord. All young women and girls should be seeking the holiness and maturity that is described here.

This passage also has a great deal of application for men. If you are a boy or a young man, or if you're a single man of any age who hopes to be married, this passage is a very clear description of the kind of woman you should be looking for. For those who are married, this passage shows us how to pray for our wives, and how to encourage them. As husbands, we are called to be the leaders in our homes, and we must lead in such a way that our wives delight in being and becoming virtuous, God-fearing women.

Another way that this passage applies to all of us is in verse 30, "a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." This applies to all of us in two ways. First, it is not only women who should fear the Lord. We must all fear the Lord. And if we do, it will affect everything about us. Secondly, we must all praise the women in our lives who fear the Lord. That's what this day is about, and that's why I chose to preach on this text. Our mothers, sisters, daughters, sisters-in-Christ: all women who fear the Lord should be praised and honored and encouraged, and I hope that will be true in this sermon and in our families on this Mother's Day.

I plan to begin this sermon with the first application, concerning the fear of the Lord. And I will conclude the sermon by encouraging all of us to praise the God-fearing women in our lives. And in between those two points we'll look at several characteristics of a woman who fears the Lord.

These verses in Proverbs 31 are an acrostic poem. The first word in each verse begins with a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and it goes through the complete alphabet, from aleph to tav. An acrostic is a way of describing something in a memorable and creative way. And that's what we find here. Of course, it doesn't have the same effect in English as it does in the original Hebrew. But this is a beautiful tribute to the woman who fears the Lord. The writer uses this acrostic to describe all of these characteristics of the godly woman. If you find it difficult to follow the flow of thought, it's because of the acrostic. The desire to start each statement with a certain letter may make it sound a little wooden and abrupt. It's very different than the writing of Paul, who develops themes and makes points very logically and deliberately. This is a very different kind of literature. It is a beautifully crafted acrostic, spelling out many descriptions of a virtuous woman.

Verse 30 speaks of the most important and most fundamental characteristic of this woman. "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." I want to begin by speaking about the fear of the Lord. This is a point that is applicable to all of us.

Fear God, and You Will Fear Him Alone

Here's the truth that I hope will convict and encourage every one of us this morning: "Fear God, you will fear Him alone." If you have an appropriate fear in your life for the living God, you won't have to fear anyone or anything else. The fear of the Lord will drive out every other fear in your life. If you truly fear God, then you will fear Him alone.

The Proverbs 31 woman fears the Lord. Most of the verses in this passage focus on practical wisdom. This verse at the end of the passage shows us the foundation for all wisdom, the fear of the Lord. In this way the Book of Proverbs ends how it began. Chapter 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Also, in 9:10 it says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." And here at the end of Proverbs, "a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." The woman who fears the Lord has found the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of wisdom. She has discovered what life is all about. It's not about charm. It's not about physical beauty, which is vain and fades away. Life is about fearing the Lord. Life is about honoring the Lord and living before Him reverently and having a healthy fear of His power and His wrath against sin. The woman who is to receive praise is the woman who fears the Lord.

Now notice in these verses what this woman does NOT fear. We're told that she fears the Lord, and now look at what she

does not fear. In verse 21 it says, “She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet.” She has worked diligently, and her family is well-clothed, and she has no fear of the snow or the cold. She fears the Lord, but she doesn’t fear for the well-being of her family. Also in verse 25, “Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.” Isn’t that an awesome verse! That’s something all women *and* all men should strive for. We should seek to be women and men who laugh at the time to come. Not fearful of tomorrow. Not worried about the future. Not fretting over hypothetical calamities that may or may not befall us. When we fear the future we are failing to fear God. But if we fear God, we will fear Him alone. We won’t be afraid of the future. We’ll laugh at the time to come!

How does this work? Why is it true that if we fear God, we will fear Him alone? If we fear the Lord, we won’t have to fear anything else. Why is this true?

We need to understand that the fear of the Lord is the kind of fear that drives us *to* Him not *away* from Him. Normally, when we fear something we want to run away from it. If you see a snake in the grass, and you’re afraid of snakes, then your immediate impulse is to get away from it. But the fear of the Lord is very different. The fear of the Lord will not cause us to run *away* from Him. It will cause us to run *to* Him. Because part of fearing the Lord is the fear of running away from Him. If you do run from the Lord, it’s not because you fear Him, but because you don’t fear Him enough. If you truly fear the Lord, you will stand in awe of His majesty and His power and His righteous wrath against sin, and you will tremble at the thought of being God’s enemy. And this is what drives us closer and closer to Him, clinging to Him for dear life.

Aslan is the Christ-figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, written by C. S. Lewis. I love the line where Susan asks if Aslan is safe. The children have just heard of Aslan for the first time, and are told that he is lion, the King of Beasts. And Susan says, “Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a Lion.” And the response comes back, “Safe? . . . Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” I think this imagery helps us understand what it means to fear the Lord. We need to see that Jesus Christ is NOT safe! He isn’t a little teddy bear who simply affirms us in everything we do. He isn’t someone we can put in a little box and make Him conform to our desires and plans. He’s not safe.

He’s a powerful Lion, and you don’t want to see His wrath. You don’t want His wrath to be against you. For He has infinite power, and He hates sin. And He will destroy those who run from Him. He will condemn to hell every person who persists in their sin and rebellion against Him. Those are the individuals who do

not fear the Lord. They think they can live however they want to live, and there won't be any consequences. They don't know the Lord, and they don't fear Him. If you are running away from God, repent! Turn around and run to Him. Embrace Jesus.

Jesus Christ is not safe, but He's good. He is so good! He is a powerful Lion, and the thought of being His enemy is terrifying. But His infinite power is no longer against us who believe. He is for us, if we are clinging to Him. Jesus Christ died in our place, and paid the penalty for our sin, so that all who run to Him and hold on to Him will escape God's wrath and receive the reward of eternal life.

This is why our fear of Him does not mean that we have to cower in frightened terror, wondering if we'll be destroyed. Jesus already bore that wrath for us, and now the most powerful Being in the universe is for us, not against us. This is how fearing the Lord changes our lives. We fear running away from Him, because we understand the consequences of being His enemy. And instead we run to Him, because we see the eternal joys of being near Him. Remember this: The infinite power that God will use to punish those who run away from Him, is also the infinite power that He uses to bless those who run to Him.

It's in this way that our fear of God will drive us to Him, and it will drive out every other fear. If the most powerful Being in the universe is for us, then what is there to fear? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:30). Let me read you a few other verses that speak of the fear of the Lord. Psalm 27:1 says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Of course, the answer is: "No one!" I don't have to fear anyone, because the Lord is my light and my salvation. He's the stronghold of my life.

Psalm 112 begins, "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!" Then it says in verse 7, "He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord." Just like the woman of Proverbs 31, this person fears the Lord and doesn't fear other things. In this case, there's no fear of bad news. Do you find yourself fearing bad news? The phone rings, and you worry that something bad has happened. You go to the doctor, and you fear there's going to be a bad report. You have a meeting with your boss, and you're afraid that you're going to lose your job. The bad news may come. It *will* come, in various ways throughout our lives. But the point is that we don't have to be afraid! We don't have to be afraid of bad news. Those difficult things that will come into our lives are all things that the omnipotent God is using for our good. And therefore we don't need to be afraid, because God is for us.

In Proverbs 29:25 there's a contrast between fearing man and trusting the Lord. It says, "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe." We are all so prone to wanting the praise of other people. We tend to be people-pleasers. We want the approval of our friends, and we don't want to be criticized by anyone. But the fear of man lays a snare. Instead, we must trust the Lord. When we trust the Lord, when we fear Him, when run to Him and delight in Him, we won't care what other people think of us, or what they say about us, or what they might do to harm us. The fear of the Lord will drive out every other fear.

Fear God, and you will fear Him alone. You will have nothing else to fear, because God is for you and He is working all things together for your good. I pray that this will be true of all of us, women and men, girls and boys. Let us fear God, and fear nothing else.

Next, I want to highlight from this passage several characteristics of a woman who fears the Lord. The woman in the passage is a wife and mother, but these are principles that apply to all women, whether you are a single mother, or a wife without children, or a woman who is neither a wife nor a mother. These are character traits that are true of the woman who fears the Lord, and they are things that every woman and every girl should pursue in her life. I'll mention five things. Most of these will be very brief.

I. She is trustworthy.

Look at verse 11, "The heart of her husband trusts in her . . ." Her husband trusts her. He is never worried about her faithfulness to him. He never has to wonder if she is using their money in dishonest or foolish ways. He trusts her, and that is a great blessing for a husband, to have a trustworthy wife.

II. She is a helper to her husband.

Verse 12, "She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life." Verse 23, "Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land." It seems odd that right in the middle of this passage about the woman who fears the Lord there's a verse about the husband. But it makes a point about the woman's commitment to her husband. Her work at home and service to her husband benefits his reputation and success. He is a better man because he is married to her. And in verse 28 he praises her because of her virtue.

Wives, do you have this kind of mentality in your marriage? Is it your desire to be a helper to your husband? This is God's design that we see from the very beginning when God created Adam and Eve. He made the husband to be the leader and the wife to be his helper, and this is a beautiful thing! It is something that brings great joy to husbands and wives as they

fulfill the specific roles God has given them. And it is also something that greatly glorifies God because it is a living portrait of Christ's relationship to the church, as Paul writes about in Ephesians 5.

III. She is a hard worker.

This is seen throughout the passage. Look, for instance, at verses 13-16, "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 maidens. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard."

The godly wife and mother works efficiently in managing her household. She redeems the time. She is so dedicated to the success of her husband and children that she works and plans and prepares food and provides clothes. As Titus 2 says, she is "busy at home" or "working at home."

It also appears that this woman is doing some work outside of the home. In verse 16 she considers a field and buys it. In verse 18 she perceives that her merchandise is profitable. In verse 24 "she makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant." I think the emphasis we need to see in this passage is that the woman who fears the Lord works hard to serve her husband and care for her family, and those are the core commitments that motivate her work, whether it's guiding the myriad of tasks at home or selling some of her merchandise to earn extra income. Whatever she's doing, her focus is on her husband and her family.

Therefore, if you are a wife and you're working, or thinking about working, you need talk this over with your husband and ask the question: "Is this a good thing for our family at this time?" There are so many pressures that may make a woman feel like she needs to work outside the home. Maybe the budget is tight. Or maybe you want more stuff. Or maybe you feel the pressure from others that working outside the home is more important or respectable than being a homemaker.

Dorothy Patterson is the wife of Paige Patterson, who is the president of Southwestern Seminary in Texas. And Dorothy has written and spoken a lot on the topic of biblical womanhood. Listen to this very insightful observation that she makes about the world's contradictory values. She says,

"[M]uch of the world would agree that being a housekeeper is acceptable as long as you are not caring for your own home; treating men with attentive devotion would also be right as long as the man is the boss in the office and not your own husband; caring for children would even be deemed heroic service for which presidential awards could be given as long as

the children are someone else's and not your own. We must not be overcome by the surrogacy of this age, which offers even a substitute womb for those so encumbered by lofty pursuits that they cannot accept God-given roles and assignments" (in her chapter in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*).

The career of homemaking and child-rearing is infinitely important. There is no job that will require more of your creativity and energy and patience and diligence, and there is no job that will bring you more joy and delight. This is God's delightful assignment that He has given to wives and mothers. Don't let the world tell you that anything else is more important. Embrace this task, and work at it with all your might to the glory of God!

IV. She helps those in need.

Verse 20, "She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy." This woman looks to the needs of her family, but she also looks to other needs around her. She is generous and hospitable and helpful. In verse 26 it says, "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." She looks for ways to help others, both in practical, tangible ways, and also in emotional and spiritual ways. She is a sage, and others will seek out her wise counsel and benefit from it.

V. She is not overcome by worry.

Verse 25, which I already pointed out, says, "she laughs at the time to come." This woman fears the Lord, and out of her fear of the Lord flows wisdom and kindness and hard work. And because of these things she can look to the future without being overcome by worry. The virtuous, godly woman will trust in God, and in His providential plans for her. And therefore she won't be consumed with fretting over the details of the future. She will laugh at the time to come.

A Woman Who Feels the Lord Is To Be Praised

I want to conclude, now, by coming back to verse 30 to emphasize the other important application from this verse. I began by talking about the fear of the Lord, and now I want to encourage all of us to praise the woman who fears the Lord. Verse 30 says, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." This woman ought to be highly esteemed and honored. She should be commended for her godly life. Not that she would become prideful, but that she would delight in the good things God is doing in her life and that she would be encouraged and motivated to persevere in these things. It is appropriate for us to find great joy in all the manifestations of God's grace. When we see evidences of grace in our wives, or mothers, or sisters, we ought to praise them for these things. We

ought to celebrate what God is doing. Verse 28 says, “Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.” Isn’t that a great Mother’s Day verse! That’s what this day should be about. Children, make sure that today, and every day, you express how much you appreciate your mother and her godly virtues. Husbands, be intentional about noticing and complementing the godly characteristics you see in your wife.

What a blessing it is to be married to a woman who fears the Lord! This is not something to take for granted. The first verse in this passage makes that very point, “An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.” Matthew Henry wrote, “Good women are very scarce . . . The more rare good wives are the more they are to be valued.” I want to say before all of you that I am so grateful to God for giving me a wife who fears the Lord. It is an unspeakable blessing, and one that I come to appreciate more and more with each passing year. Stacy is more precious to me than any treasure. She is trustworthy. She is my helper. She is a hard worker. She helps those in need. She laughs at the time to come. And all because she is a woman who fears the Lord. My heart delights in her.

I hope that we will all cherish and honor the godly women in our lives. Based on this passage we will praise our mothers and wives not primarily because they’re charming or beautiful, but because they fear the Lord. “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”