

Gleaning Wisdom from the Proverbs, #13—

"The Wonderful Wife"

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I've often said that the thing I most like about being a pastor is the view.

I say that metaphorically,

referring to the meaningful view of human life I get as a pastor.

But I can also say that more literally.

Take the view I get at a wedding, for example.

Who has the best seat in the house?

It's the pastor.

There's nothing like the star-struck look of love in the eyes of the bride and groom,

full of the joy that that love brings,

and full of the hope that that joy will last forever.

It's a great view.

But there is another view,

a view of a very different kind, that I wish I didn't have to see.

But it is, sadly, a reality far too often found in our fallen world.

It is the view of a married couple, estranged and at odds,

full of animosity toward one another,

lashing out with ugly accusations

and soul-piercing insults.

There is nothing quite like it.

In fact, I'm told that policemen have no more dangerous duty

that to intervene in a domestic dispute.

They have no idea what sort of violent madness they might encounter.

The view at the wedding altar is a beautiful thing,

but there is nothing uglier than the view in divorce court. /

I mention this

because it illustrates that, when it comes to marriage,

the stakes are very high.

"For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother

and shall cleave unto his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

With these very familiar words from Genesis 2

we are given a foundation for marriage.

A new social unit is formed as the man and the woman moves outside

the protection and authority of their own homes

to be joined to one another--

to become one flesh.

In this relationship of intimacy and interconnection

there is no greater potential for joy and contentment
in all of our human relationships;
But in this relationship of intimacy and interconnection
there is also no greater potential for pain and heartache.
And I have seen it in my time as a pastor—
both of those views.

Clearly, marriage is no casual affair.
When things go badly, the consequences can be almost unbearable;
but in a good marriage, in a godly marriage,
both husband and wife have great cause for thanksgiving and praise to God. /

As we noticed in our study of Proverbs,
this book is written as the words of a wise father to his son,
and one of the things that father wants to pass on to his son
is the understanding that his future wife
will be the making or the breaking of him and his home.

The two become one flesh--
"bone of my bones" Adam said of Eve.
And for that reason, if there is disease in any part of the relationship,
it will quickly spread,
So, Prov. 12:4 says—
"A wife of noble character is her husband's crown,"
Such a wife is royal indeed,
not only bringing honor and dignity to her husband,
but also bringing out the very best in him.
"but," we read, **"a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones."**

The Jewish rabbis also understood the great influence
a wife can have on her husband--for good or ill.
It's illustrated in this anecdote from Jewish lore--
"It is related of a pious man who was married to a pious woman that, being childless,
they divorced one another.
He went and married a wicked woman and she made him wicked.
She went and married a wicked man and she made him righteous.
It follows that all depends upon the woman."¹

That's the reality that lay behind the strong biblical prohibition
against the Israelite men marrying Canaanite women
when the Israelites moved into the promised land.
The Lord knew who would influence whom.

And that same reality was displayed in the life of Solomon himself—
his many foreign wives ultimately led to idolatrous practices in Israel,
which resulted in the Lord's judgment on the nation
and the tragic division of the kingdom.

There is no question—marriage matters.

¹ Aitken, *Proverbs*, p. 154

And the wise father wants his son to be very conscious of that fact.

He wants his son to realize that because of the intimacy of the marital relationship
that a wife who is hard to get along with is difficult to escape,
as much as one might like to.

The wise father in the Proverbs with a touch of humor suggests in 21:9
that it would be better not just to sleep on the couch
but to pitch one's tent on the roof
than to share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

But a little further on in v.19 of that chapter he seems to reconsider--
the roof is still much too close for comfort:

**"Better to live in a desert
than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife,"** it says.

(But notice, there is no mention here of even the possibility
of divorcing such a woman—he knows he's stuck!)

The wife, it seems, sets the tone in the home,
and if that tone is sharp or flat, nothing but chaotic and painful dissonance
can be the result.

Rather than the joyful harmony of a symphony in the home,
the only sound that comes to the mind of the wise man
is the maddening drip, drip, drip, of a leaky roof.
Living under roofs made only of loose wooden boards with clay or plaster overlay,
leakage was a constant problem in the rainy season.

"Among the Canaanites, so an old folk tale tells us,
repairing the roof in wet weather
was one of the most highly prized virtues in a good son."²

But at least a leaky roof could be plugged up--
Prov. 27:15,16—"A quarrelsome wife is like
a constant dripping on a rainy day,
restraining her is like restraining the wind
or grasping oil with the hand."
Good luck!

Are these simply male chauvinist ravings?
Certainly I wouldn't expect these proverbs to be stitched in needlepoint
on Gloria Steinem's kitchen wall,
but simply because they speak to only one side of the issue
doesn't mean that they are any less true.

The Sage of Proverbs has already said plenty
about the absurd foolishness of the sluggard, for example,
which could surely apply to husbands,
as many wives know from experience.

Though it is fair to say that the wise teacher in Proverbs

² Aitken, *Proverbs*, p.152

does speak from a male's perspective
in discussing the potential pitfalls of marriage,
there is no doubt that one could substitute husband for wife in almost any of them
without any change in meaning.

Let's be real about marriage.

Prov. 18:22—"He who finds a wife finds what is good
and receives favor from the Lord."

That is undoubtedly true!

I can attest to that from experience.

But surely that Proverb assumes that the wife that is found is a good wife.

For a nagging wife, a quarrelsome wife, a wife who brings trouble
will come as no favor at all.

She will be a burden to be endured,
rather than a delight to be enjoyed.

The stakes are high--
marriage can bring great happiness;
and marriage can inflict deep pain.
And if that is the case, whom do you marry?

It is with this question in mind that we move to the final passage of the book—
a most unusual but well-known passage in Proverbs--chap. 31:10-31,
It is a passage which describes in some detail what can only be called
"the Wonderful Wife."

It is an incredible picture—

Just look again at how she is described--

- Prov. 31:13 **She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.**
- 14 **She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.**
- 15 **She gets up while it is still dark;
she provides food for her family
and portions for her servant girls.**
- 16 **She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.**
- 17 **She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.**
- 18 **She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.**
- 19 **In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.**
- 20 **She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.**
- 21 **When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.**
- 22 **She makes coverings for her bed;**

she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

What a woman she is!

Up before dawn and the last to bed,
she is an able seamstress
and is involved in textile marketing.

She trades in real estate,
plants a vineyard,
and takes care of the poor and the needy.

She always carries herself with dignity and splendor,
confidently looking to the future--
"she can laugh at the days to come," it says (v. 25).

There is no question that the woman of Prov. 31
shatters the typical stereotypes of the lowly housewife.

She is a woman of strength--
strength of character, certainly--v.10
but also even physical strength--v.17
which in the KJV read--"She girdeth her loins with strength,
and strengtheneth her arms."--
which sounds a lot like an aerobics instructor!
One writer describes her as something of an Amazon warrior.

And again in v.25--"she is clothed with strength and dignity," we read.
She will need that strength if she is to plant a vineyard as we read in v.16.
This certainly challenges any Victorian image
of the weak and delicate defenseless woman
who would never get her hands dirty.

Notice, too, that there is nothing sedentary or stationary about this wife's life--
she's not confined to watching the soap operas on TV.
She is active with a wide range of economic interests.

v.24--**She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.**

v.16--**She considers a field and buys it**

v.18--**She sees that her trading is profitable.**

No doubt, she knows how to drive a hard bargain,
but she never becomes hard-hearted--

v.20--**She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.**

She has it all--

To put it simply, she is a very competent woman--

and fully able to teach others--
 v.26--**she speaks with wisdom,
 and faithful instruction is on her tongue.**
 v.11--**Her husband has full confidence in her,**

Yes, the wonderful wife of Prov. 31 shatters stereotypes.
 She is no stay-at-home-housewife,
 never venturing beyond the local supermarket. /

But I think it would be a mistake to use this woman, as is sometimes done,
 as a Biblical example of the
 independent, self-directed, self-focussed business woman
 held out as today's woman
 and the woman of the future by the feminists.
 I say that because neither is she independent
nor is her attention focused on herself at all.

She is involved in a wide variety of activities,
 but they are very clearly centered on her home.
 v.27—"She watches over the affairs of her household"
 vv. 11,12—"Her husband has full confidence in her
 and lacks nothing of value."
 She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life."

v.15—"she provides food for her family"
 v.21—"When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
 for all of them are clothed in scarlet."

All her varied activities are evidence not of her concern to further her career,
 but of her concern to care for her family.

She clearly oversees the affairs of her household--
 she rules over the activities of the home.
 That's a role the Apostle Paul calls wives to in 1 Tim. 5:14³--
 a job which requires great strength and intense activity
 and diligence in a wide range of endeavors.
 She must be cook, seamstress, teacher, counselor, foreman, and much more.
 To handle all these roles well she must be a very capable person,
 well deserving of her reward of public praise.

For this reason, I feel that Prov. 31 doesn't speak so much
 to those women who succeed in the marketplace
 as much as to those women who manage their homes.

Prov. 14:1 also speaks of the woman's role in establishing the home--
 "The wise woman builds her house,
 but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down."

³There note the use of the verb οἰκοδεσπότην.

sometimes all you can do is call Dominos!

You may relate to the title of a book written by Nancy Kennedy, entitled
Help! I'm Being Intimidated by the Proverbs 31 Woman!

A few weeks back, Tim talked about the old TV dads, with their fatherly wisdom;
in her book, Kennedy talks about the old TV wives--

Donna Reed, Harriet of *Ozzie and Harriet*, June Cleaver, Shirley Partridge,
Jane of *Father Knows Best*, and Carol Brady of *The Brady Bunch*.

They were the role models for wives and mothers in America
back in the 50s to the early 70s.

"Among them they had twenty-two children,
six husbands and three maids," Kennedy writes.

"They looked better cleaning their houses
than most of us looked at our wedding.

They never lost their temper, gained weight
or spent more money than their husbands made.

They never scrubbed a toilet,
were never invaded by roaches or carpenter ants,
never shouted,

and no one ever knew what they did
between the time their families left in the morning
and came home in the evening.

Every week you viewed a miracle--
seven out of seven women who got their figures back after having children."

They were the prime-time mothers.

Those characters, too, could be intimidating
as well as guilt-inducing.

But eventually, the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time mothers rebelled
and insisted that TV give them someone who would relieve their guilt,
someone they could compare themselves with more favorably--
so they came up with Rosann. /

I understand how some women would simply rather skip over
the 31st chapter of Proverbs--
it's too depressing for them.

But two things have to be kept in mind—

First, what we have in Proverbs 31 is obviously an idealized picture.

This is not meant to be a description of a real woman.

And its idealized content is made obvious—

in its original Hebrew at least—
by its poetic form.

For in the Hebrew, this passage is composed such that each of its 22 verses
begins with a successive letter of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet--
from *aleph* to *tau*.

It is an A-Z portrait, a full and complete picture of the ideal.

It is meant to inspire with its goodness and beauty.
This is what a good life can look like.

But also, and related to that—
we have to see that more important than what this woman does
is who she is.
It is her character, her moral and spiritual makeup, that matters most.

v. 10—"A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.

v.26—"She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue."

v.30--"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

This woman is marked out by her wisdom--
the wisdom that comes through her fear of the Lord.
This is the key to understanding the role of this passage
as a fitting conclusion to the book.

In fact, it is important to note that in several places
what is said of the wonderful wife in Proverbs 31
is also said of Wisdom itself.

In Prov. 18:22 we read—"He who finds a wife finds what is good
and receives favor from the LORD."

And in 8:35 [Wisdom says,]
"For whoever finds me finds life
and receives favor from the LORD."

14:1—"The wise woman builds her house,"

9:1—"Wisdom has built her house;"

31:10—"A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies."

8:11--wisdom "is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her."

Not only does this wonderful wife speak with wisdom in 31:10--
she is, in a sense, an embodiment of wisdom.

She is what wisdom looks like as it is lived out
in the particular circumstances

of life in the home in ancient Israel.

And it is no ordinary home—the home of a typical peasant family.

This woman has servants,
 she owns property,
 her children "are clothed in scarlet"
 "she is clothed in fine linen and purple,"
 and her husband is a respected leader in the community.
 Her home is one characterized by the prosperity and human flourishing
 that wisdom provides.

This passage presents a portrait of wisdom
 embodied in a wife and her household.
 And it is a very attractive picture.

So I say to you wives,
 and those of you thinking about becoming wives,
 and even the girls among us--
 don't let Prov. 31 function simply as some job description
 which you must follow,
 so much as a picture of a life ruled by Wisdom
 which is given to inspire and encourage.

If you are to be a Proverbs 31 woman,
 the key component is to seek wisdom.

Let wisdom work itself out in your life--
 as it does in the woman pictured here--
 Notice the principles of wisdom found here--

- There's the value of hard work, industriousness--
 which the sluggard neglects to his own destruction.
- There's the importance of justice, mercy and generosity
 in caring for the poor and needy, which invites God's blessing.
- there are the wise words that flow from her lips.
- And most important of all is the fear of the Lord she possesses,
 which is the beginning of wisdom.

It is character, not achievement or outward appearance,
 that is most important here--

12:4—"A wife of *noble character* is her husband's crown"

19:14—"Houses and wealth are inherited from parents,
 but a *prudent wife* is from the Lord."

It is not how much you accomplish in a day,
 or how many activities you can cram into 24 hours,
 or how perfect your home appears;
 it is wisdom, the wisdom of God, that makes this wife wonderful.

And so I would say to you men--to those who are married,
 and to those who might think of being married--
 even to those boys among us this morning--
 What ought you to prize most in a wife?

her husband also, and he praises her:
 29 "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."
 30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
 but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
 31 Give her the reward she has earned,
 and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

And isn't this an appropriate place to close this book.

From the beginning, a wise father has been addressing his son—

Back in Prov. 6:20-24, he said—

"My son, keep your father's commands
 and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
Bind them upon your heart forever;
 fasten them around your neck.
When you walk, they will guide you;
 when you sleep, they will watch over you;
 when you awake, they will speak to you.
For these commands are a lamp,
 this teaching is a light,
 and the corrections of discipline are the way to life,
keeping you from the immoral woman,
 from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife."

The "immoral woman," the "wayward wife,"—
 these were ways of speaking of foolishness—
 captured in the figure of Madame Folly.

For both Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly found in the early chapters of this book
 call out in the streets—
 beckoning us to follow in their ways,
 inviting us to join in their respective feasts.

This wise father is urging his son to take the good path,
 and to listen to the right voice.

In chapter 7—

The wise father warns his son of that one voice—the voice of folly!
 He tells the story of a young man who falls into a deadly trap.
 He was "a youth who lacked judgment."
 and he listened to the wayward woman.

21 With persuasive words she led him astray;
 she seduced him with her smooth talk.
 22 All at once he followed her
 like an ox going to the slaughter,
 like a deer stepping into a noose

- 23 till an arrow pierces his liver,
 like a bird darting into a snare,
 little knowing it will cost him his life.
- 24 Now then, my sons, listen to me;
 pay attention to what I say.
- 25 Do not let your heart turn to her ways
 or stray into her paths.
- 26 Many are the victims she has brought down;
 her slain are a mighty throng.
- 27 Her house is a highway to the grave,
 leading down to the chambers of death."

This is in contrast to the voice of Lady Wisdom in chapter 8,
 8:34—"Blessed is the man who listens to me,
 watching daily at my doors,
 waiting at my doorway.

- 35 For whoever finds me finds life
 and receives favor from the LORD."

So did that son listen to his father?
 Which voice did he listen to?

Perhaps chapter 31 is an answer to that question.
 The receptive son becomes the blessed husband
 by his embrace of wisdom,
 embodied in this wonderful wife.
 He found wisdom, and so received favor from the Lord.

The way of wisdom is the way of life—
 and this Prov. 31 marriage reflects that good path.

Marriage is an important part of human life—
 it is not all-important—because Jesus was never married.
 But still, for those who do marry,
 their happiness is very much connected to its success.

And marriage is also an important theme in the Bible—
 for it is a central picture of God's relationship with his people.
 And history as we know it will end with a marriage—
 the marriage supper of the Lamb—
 and that marriage, too, will reflect the way of wisdom
 and the way of life.

For that marriage is a union with the one who is truly wisdom embodied,
 the Word become flesh,
 the Son who reveals the Father—
 the "who has become for us" as the Apostle Paul says,
 "wisdom from God" (1 Cor. 1:30).

To have a part in that wedding feast
 one must first respond to his invitation—
"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," Jesus says,
"and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

May we listen to him and live,
 and receive favor from the Lord. //

Prayer--

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Eph. 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Closing Hymn: #138 *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Benediction:

Rom. 11:33-36

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
 How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
 "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"
 "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"
 For from him and through him and to him are all things.
 To him be the glory forever! Amen.

**"Living Wisely in God's World:
Lessons from Proverbs"
Dec. 16, 2018; No. 13**

"The Wonderful Wife"

"The wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones" (Prov. 12:4). Proverbs presents both sides of this truth, but in chapter 31 the book emphasizes the first, offering us a picture of Wisdom embodied in real life. It is an ideal that has relevance to us all.

I. A Description of the "Wonderful Wife"

Competent and Accomplished

An Able Household Manager

"The wise woman builds her house."

II. The "Wonderful Wife" as a Model of Wisdom

*"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."
--Prov. 31:3*

Which Way Will You Choose?

Sermon Response:

"The Wonderful Wife"

Proverbs 31

- Read Prov. 31:30. Consider how "counter-culture" this perspective is! How can we transform our minds with this important truth? How can we reinforce this truth in the life of the church?
- Read Prov. 31:10-31. What emerges from these verses that suggests the character and heart of this virtuous wife?
- Read Prov. 21:9,19. Repent of those times when you (man or woman) have been quarrelsome and ill-tempered. Why did you become like that? How can you prevent that in the future?

- Read 1 Pet. 3:1-6. How does this complement or reinforce what is taught in the Proverbs? How can this "unfading beauty" be developed?
- Read Eph. 5:25-27. How does the biblical teaching on the godly wife help us understand the imagery of the church as the "bride of Christ"? How ought we to relate to Christ as our husband?