



Proverbs 31

“THE POWER OF A COMMITTED WOMAN”

May 19, 2013
Mother’s Day

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“Following Christ at City Center!”

PROVERBS 31
"THE POWER OF A COMMITTED WOMAN"

1) v.1 MOTHER'S THREE-FOLD QUESTION.

1 The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, which his mother taught him: **Birth (Son)/Conception (Womb)/Vows (Marriage)**
2 What, *my* son? What, son of *my* womb? What, son of *my* vows? **3-Fold Question For Emphasis**

2) vv.3-9 THREE-FOLD ANSWER: WOMEN, WINE, AND LEADERSHIP.

Mothers Often Answer Their Own Questions!

a) v.3 Counsel On Women and Sexual Passion (Promiscuity Is Out!).

3 Give not your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. **Prince Harry In Las Vegas!**

b) vv.4-7 On Alcohol and The Administration Of Justice (Addiction Is Out!).

4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink;
5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.
6 Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; **Anaesthetic**
7 let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

c) vv.8-9 On Justice and The Poor (Service And Courage Are In!).

A Ruler Must Guard Mercy And Justice

8 Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate.
9 Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the rights of the poor and needy.

1') vv.10-31 MOTHER'S QUESTION.

10 A good wife who can find? **Question Creates Room For An Answer**

2') vv.10b-31 MOTHER'S ANSWER: IDEAL HEBREW WOMAN (ACROSTIC POEM).

VIRTUES

a She is far more precious than jewels. **Of Great Value**
11 The heart of **HER HUSBAND** trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. **Marital Trust**
12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. **Rich Partnership**

13 She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. **Skill in Textiles**
14 She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. **Food Importer**
15 She rises while it is yet **night** and provides food for her household and tasks for her maids. **Planner**
16 She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. **Viniculture**
17 She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong. **Physically Fit**
18 She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. **Business Acumen**
Her lamp does not go out at **night**. **Hard Work: Bookkeeping**
19 She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. **Highly Skilled**
20 She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. **Generosity and Charity**

b She is not afraid of snow for **her household**, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. **Sense Of Class & Style**
22 She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

c **HER HUSBAND** is known in the gates, **Seat Of Government**
23 when he sits among the elders of the land. **Legal and Community Affairs**

b' She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the merchant. **Second Business**
25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. **Confident/ Prepared**
26 She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. **Teacher of Truth**
27 She looks well to the ways of **her household**, and does not eat the bread of idleness. **Leadership**
28

a' Her children rise up and call her blessed; **HER HUSBAND** also, and he praises her: **Loved by Family**
29 "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." **Delight of his Life**
30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. **Devoted to God**
31 Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates. **Worthy of Praise**

THE POWER OF A COMMITTED WOMAN

*"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."*

A wise commentary on the fashion industry.

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During a drought in Australia, the creatures of the bush became so thirsty they braved even the dangerous dooryards of settlers for a drink. The settlers, whose sheep died like flies for lack of water, were constantly on the alert lest the wild creatures drink what water was left. Each man hung a loaded gun near the doorway.

One hot, summer day, a settler noticed movement in the brush. Instantly he seized his gun and stood ready. Out of the bush a mother kangaroo, with a young one in her pouch, came loping across the brown, parched open space surrounding the house. Nearer and nearer she came, her beautiful brown eyes fixed beggingly on the settler. She made her way straight to the tub of water placed there for the use of the few domestic animals that survived. Reaching the tub, the kangaroo waited, her soft gaze fixed on the man, while the young kangaroo in her pouch drank its fill. Then she turned without taking a drop for herself and loped back across the arid, open space and on into the tangled depths of the bush. The settler watched till she disappeared. Then he hung up his gun and with a lump in his throat, went back to work."¹

A sentimental story; but it touches on a truth that has set me back on my heels more than once, the courage and sacrifice of mother-love at its best. As many times as I have seen it, I still have a deep emotional reaction when I see a mother hold or nurse her newborn. It's a mystery of mother-child love that I cannot participate in as a man, and I view it from the outside with wonder and awe. It reminds me that I too

¹ Leslie Flynn, *Come Alive With Illustrations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 172.

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was once a helpless, wrinkled baby boy, freshly severed from my umbilical tether and in need of food and the touch of love. We all were, and that's the fundamental human reality Mother's Day brings before us: that though our father's also provided genetic building blocks and later shaped our character, it is our mothers to whom we are primally bound by God's design, knit together in the depths of her womb and welded into her heart. In the bonding and love of a mother for her child, we catch a glimpse of the commitment and caring of our God, whom we call *Abba/Father*,² but who loves us like a mamma.

The Origin Of Mother's Day

Mother's Day is a mixture of church origins and national observance. It was President Woodrow Wilson who in 1914 declared the second Sunday in May should be celebrated as Mother's Day. But a presidential declaration was only the end of a long journey begun with Mrs. Anna Jarvis, a Sunday School teacher at the Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. She was born in 1832 and, like many women of her day, carried a load of grief with which few in our day are familiar. Of her twelve children, four survived to adulthood. But grief did not crush her, for she was a woman with remarkable resources. In her small town she started clubs of mothers who worked for better health care for their families.

After the Civil War, these clubs held meetings to help patch up feelings between West Virginia soldiers, some of whom had worn blue and others gray. Some of the qualities we read about in Proverbs 31 were found in the life of Anna Jarvis. In her own way she was an advocate for women and nurtured the dream of a day to honor mothers. But it was left to her namesake daughter, Miss Anna Jarvis, to make the dream a reality. After her mother's death in 1905, Anna devoted her life to seeing Mother's Day become a reality. She made speeches and wrote thousands of letters. Three years later in 1908 she organized the first Mother's Day celebration and arranged for a sermon to be preached in honor of her mother and mothers everywhere. The service lasted from 8 o'clock in the morning till noon! Next to Christmas and Easter, Mother's Day is the third most widely celebrated holiday among Christians.³

² Galatians 4:6.

³ Betty Debnam, "How Mother's Day Began," *The Mini Page, Richland Northeast Newspaper*, May 10, 1990.

On this day we honor our mothers and all the women of influence in our lives.

The Power Of Good Questions

Proverbs 31 introduces us to the wisdom a royal mother passed on to her son, which he in turn remembered and passed on to whoever it was that edited the final version of the book of Proverbs, a collection of Hebrew wisdom: "The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, which his mother taught him."

The final chapter of Proverbs falls into two parts, each of which answers a question. The first question is repeated three times, each time with minor variation for emphasis. Each phrase emphasizes that this *boy* (king that he now is) had better listen to his mamma who gathers his attention through questions: "What, my son? What, son of my womb? What, son of my vows?" He is her son by the risk and labor of birth, *my son*. He is his son by conception with his father, *son of my womb*. He is her son because of her marriage to the king, *son of my vows*.

Then comes the first answer in which she instructs her princely son on sex, drugs, and power. This mother did not skirt the difficult issues of life but faced them squarely. After all, what mother wants her son to be immoral, a drunk, or a scoundrel? She is forthright and memorable. Her teaching is brief, poetic, and cumulative, with hooks to fix it in the imagination. Likely his father, the king before him, was already dead, and so this teaching on kingly virtue came from his mother.

But then the queen-mother moves to a second question, also with long term implications, "A good wife who can find?" Whatever other gifts she may have had, this mother knew the art of asking attention-grabbing questions; she was a master teacher. She also had the habit, like many mothers, of answering her own questions! "Just where are you going, young man? I'll tell you where you're going; you're going upstairs to clean your room!"

Her second answer is an alphabetic poem (an acrostic) of twenty two verses with each verse beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It was intended to be memorized and may have been sung to fix it on the hard disk of the mind. After all, if a young man doesn't know what to look for, he might bring any-old-thing back to the palace. A king needs self-control and character; a king also needs a virtuous wife. Much is at stake for the nation. The king must be first be the

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right kind of man, and that is why the teaching on his character comes first, if he is find the right kind of woman. Where did all the good men go?

Sex, Drugs, And Power (vv.2-9)

Someone has defined character as who and what you are when your mother's not around. It was for such a time that King Lemuel's mother instructed him after emphasizing her right to do so, "What, my son? What, son of my womb? What son of my vows?" I gave you birth; you were conceived in my womb as a result of my marriage vows to your father. It was time for her God-fearing values to be imprinted on his conscience once more, just to make sure he knew what his mother expected! Those tapes are deep, aren't they, the healthy ones and the neurotic ones?

She started with the fiery energy in his loins and a little history lesson, "Give not your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. I don't want you dating loose girls and acting like a playboy," she said. Overindulgence in sex was King Solomon's weakness; he had 700 wives and 300 concubines, and one eventually turned him away from God and led to his downfall.⁴

In the terminology of modern psychology, Solomon was sexually addicted. How easily that happens in our permissive, porn-drenched world, but at what cost? With each illicit encounter, a young man or woman weakens their capacity to bond with a single partner for life in the relationship of covenant marriage. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, couples who live together before marriage have an 80 percent higher divorce rate than those who do not.⁵ King Lemuel's mother wanted her son to be a one-woman kind of man and had the courage to tell him that one deep relationship was better than a handful of shallow ones. She had seen lots of powerful men who developed an appetite for variety and made a wreck of their lives and families. She did not want that for her boy!

⁴ Robert L. Alden, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 215.

⁵ "Living Together," *Leadership*, Spring 1989, 97. For more recent research, see Mike & Harriet McManus, *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Rewards* (New York, NY: Howard, 2008); Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All The Difference* (Chicago, ILL: Moody Press, 20110).

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Then she moved from his loins to his mouth, and to the danger of another potential addiction, alcohol. In a culture where wine was a normal drink, it's hard to make a case for abstinence from these verses, but it is clear drunkenness is ruled out: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of the afflicted." Think of how widely alcohol is abused today, and what impact it has on the judgment of persons of influence. Anyone with legal, judicial, medical, or spiritual responsibilities ought to be very careful about alcohol because it clouds the judgment. I do not believe it's possible to separate the private and public morality of our leaders. That is an artificial distinction that is not rooted in a biblical ethic.

A leader with an alcohol or other drug problem is a disaster waiting to happen. In counseling I often ask, How much alcohol have you consumed in the last month? Then, if it sounds excessive, I ask a followup, What pain or other unpleasant feelings are you numbing? Alcohol is a powerful and socially acceptable drug. Its use is not forbidden in Scripture, but there are warnings aplenty for those who overtly or covertly make it a regular part of their lives or who use it to solve problems.

But Lemuel's savvy mom had more than negative morality: don't do this and don't do that, guard your zipper, and don't be a drunk. She offered her son a vision of greatness, the challenge to use his power not to enrich himself but to serve the poor and powerless: "Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the rights of the poor and the needy." Every child needs someone to place a candle in their hand and point them to a destiny beyond themselves. The measure of power is not how much you have, but whether or not you use it for the welfare of those who have almost no power in the society. Blessed is the child whose mother is not afraid to form the conscience from the values of Scripture.

For over forty years Russell Baker wrote his satirical *Observer* column in The New York Times. The second installment of his memoirs opens with this tribute to the virtue of tenacity which his mother built into his conscience:

"My mother, dead now to this world but still roaming free in my mind, wakes me up some mornings before daybreak. 'If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a quitter.' I have heard that all my life. Now, lying in bed, coming awake in the dark, I feel the fury of her energy fighting the

good-for-nothing idler within me who wants to go back to sleep instead of tackling the brave new day."⁶

When King Lemuel awoke each morning, his mother's voice echoed in his conscience: "You are my son; I love you fiercely. Be a one-woman man; don't be a drunk; use your power to serve those less fortunate than yourself. Be a man of self-control and generous service." Rule yourself before you rule others. Be a true king. Not bad. Not bad at all.

A Noble Wife (vv.10-31)

This brings us to the second part of Proverbs 31 and to the queen mother's second question, "A good wife who can find?" There is only one word to describe the female of verses 10 through 31, Superwoman! I guarantee you that any woman here, no matter how sharp, who compares herself with this woman will come up short. Remember, this is a mother talking to her son about the ideal daughter-in-law, and the inherent poetic structure requires that virtues be cataloged till all twenty-two letters of the alphabet are exhausted. This imaginary woman can do it all, and Lemuel's mother delighted in overkill! She wanted her son to set his standards high.

Here is a summary: Superwoman is a loyal and trusted wife who always makes her husband look good, at home and in the public eye. She is an expert in at least seven fields:

- 1) textiles (vv.13, 19, 21-22, 24)
- 2) food purchase and preparation (v.15),
- 3) real-estate (v.16a),
- 4) grape-growing and wine-making (v.16b),
- 5) teaching wisdom (v.26),
- 6) marketing (v.18a), and
- 7) management by delegation (v.15c).

She is the first one up in the morning and burns the midnight oil, "her lamp does not go out at night.". She keeps physically fit, "She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong." She dresses elegantly in fine linen and purple, and her

⁶ Russell Baker, "Restless on His Laurels," *Time*, June 5, 1989.

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children looked as if they've stepped off the pages of an L.L. Bean catalog.

If there was ever an understatement, it's verse 27, she "does not eat the bread of idleness." No silly soap operas and trashy romance novels for this woman. Her home is a picture of harmony as her children rise up and call her blessed while her husband heaps praise upon her, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." On top of all this, she fears God and is generous with the poor. It's overwhelming to compare yourself with this ideal; she is without fault. Envy and anger are real options. The following is found in an old *Reader's Digest*:

"A mother of four was talking about her neighbor who had eight children. 'She's amazing! Her house is always neat as a pin; she's a wonderful cook and does her own sewing. Her children are polite and well behaved. She's active in P.T.A. and helps with the Brownies and is a den mother for the Cub Scouts. She is pretty and had loads of personality. She makes me sick!'"⁷

It's easy for mothers in our fast-paced world to feel overwhelmed all of the time, guilty much of the time, and envious the rest. Inside our heads we carry a composite picture of what a good mom is. In a book from several decades ago, *How To Be A Good Mom*,⁸ Stephen and Janet Bly have come up with a composite list of what many modern Christian mothers carry around in their heads as their own version of Proverbs 31. "A Good Mom", they write:

- * Never bakes biscuits from little cardboard tubes that go 'pow!'
- * Appears instantly whenever any family member yells, 'Mom!'
- * Knows exactly what garment each child wants to wear to school each day and has it washed, mended, and hung in the closet.
- * Is always home when you call.

⁷ May, 1961.

⁸ Chicago, ILL: Moody, 1988.

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- * Uses coupons to save a minimum of \$15 on each grocery trip.
- * Never raises her voice, and never dreads teacher conferences.
- * Attends every T-ball and soccer game in hose and heels (fresh from the office, of course, or some other world-expanding venture).
- * Never leaves kids with runny noses in the church nursery.
- * Never says no to the PTA.
- * Keeps a regimented family schedule of daily tooth flossing and Bible memorization."⁹

That's suicide! There is no way to meet all these expectations; it's even worse if you're a single mom. Not long ago I had a mother tell me only halfjokingly, "No matter what I do, I'm never going to look like the women in TV!"

Several years ago a new book for women appeared in Christian bookstores. The title? *Do Plastic Surgeons Take Mastercard?* I have only met a few women in my life who were both beautiful on the outside and of godly character. Most of the knockouts I have met ride on their looks and fail to develop the internal qualities that mark a woman of excellence. Not many Christian women will be beautiful by the standards of *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit edition, at least not for long, but all can have the fruits and gifts of the Spirit that lead to personal excellence. Much of the beauty and fashion industry is oppressive of women and especially younger girls who feel they must meet impossible standards in order to be accepted and loved.

There is an alternative to being overwhelmed by unrealistic ideals. The first strategy is to explode the myth that mothering is easy. The Blys write:

"No job on earth takes more physical, mental, social, emotional and spiritual strength than being a good wife and mother. If a gal's looking for an easy life, she might try teaching tennis, cutting diamonds, or joining a roller derby team. There is nothing easy about good

⁹ Quoted in *Focus On The Family* magazine, May, 1988, 3.

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mothering. It can be backbreaking, heartwrenching, and anxiety producing. And that's just the morning."¹⁰

The Blys then go on to explode three other myths: that mothering is natural, that mothering is always fun, and a mother is repaid for all she does. It is unfair for you to compare yourself to your mother of a generation ago. We do not live in the same world. Are you the victim of unrealistic expectations that have more to do with media images than with what God actually wants from your life? In our day one of the greatest ministries the church can offer is a safe place for mothers in different situations (single, married, at home, in the workplace, healthy children, special needs children, good marriages, bad marriages...) to support and encourage one another.

A second strategy might be to spend some time reading and praying over Proverbs 31. Turn each of this woman's virtues into a question, "Lord Jesus, this woman was trustworthy and reliable. How am I doing? Then wait for a nudge from the Holy Spirit to apply it specifically or to guide you on to the next. And when you run into a strength in your life, claim it and give thanks. Do this for each verse. Allow God both to affirm you for those virtues that are well developed and point to those who need attention. And if you are truly courageous, ask your husband or a close friend for feedback. In a world where external beauty is so lauded that most women walk around feeling less than adequate, you may want to ask the Lord to teach you the truth of v.30, "Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

For all its hype, the beauty industry is often a source of cruel oppression for women. Not long ago I stood by the cosmetics counter in one of our larger department stores. Why? I said to myself. What drives this industry? What fears does it play on, and how is it exploiting women? It focuses exclusively on the externals and on the necessity of women being attractive for men. What about the Lord who looks on the heart? How much easier to buy stuff to paint on your face than to build virtue and character and faith into your heart, "but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised!"

On the other hand, this woman had a sense of style and did not equate looking dowdy with being spiritual. Her wardrobe was linen and purple, strength and dignity.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

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A week spent meditating on this passage could open many women in this church to a new sense of dignity and power, whether you are at home full time or bringing in a paycheck, or both. This rich chapter has room for all.

Conclusion

In his book *Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise*, Dr. John Killinger includes a creed for Mother's Day. It is a fitting conclusion because it stands in awe before the best of mother-love and then points us to the love of God:

"I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who was born of the promise to a virgin named Mary.

I believe in the love Mary gave her Son that caused her to follow him in his ministry and stand by his Cross as he died.

I believe in the love of all mothers, and its importance in the lives of the children they bear. It is stronger than steel, softer than down, and more resilient than a green sapling on a hillside. It closes wounds, melts disappointments, and enables the weakest child to stand tall and straight in the fields of adversity.

I believe that this love, even at its best, is only a shadow of the love of God, a dark reflection of all that we can expect, both in this life and the next.

And I believe that one of the most beautiful sights in the world is a mother who lets this greater love flow through her to her child, blessing the world with the tenderness of her touch and the tears of her joy."¹¹

So let's honor our mothers this day, as God commanded. Let's also grant them generous forgiveness since they too are frail and faulty just like us. And let us ask our Lord Jesus, in his great love, to fill in the gaps of love and wisdom they did not have to give us. Amen.

¹¹ *Leadership*, Spring 1986, 47.
