

Proverbs 31: 10-31
Creekside COB
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“The Total Woman”

The Bible is God’s word. It is surprising, then, that portions of it barely mention God. Proverbs is an example of a book that “periodically” brings God into the picture.

There came a period in Israel’s history when the religious elders realized it was important to record and pass their wisdom on to succeeding generations. Experience is a great teacher, and the wisdom gleaned from the collective experiences of the spiritual ancestors could spare those that followed from having to learn, “the hard way.”

This is just the second time I’ve preached from Proverbs. It’s tough because there are no stories in it. It is a collection pithy sayings about what a righteous person does and doesn’t do. Get up early. Control your tongue. Don’t hang out with winebibbers and gluttons. Don’t make friends with fools. “It’s better to be poor and have integrity than rich and be perverse.”

There is another reason I am not a Proverbs fan. It encourages “musty religion.” A religion is musty if its central message is, “You MUST believe. You MUST behave. You MUST live by the letter of the law.” God doesn’t enter the equation. If we only had Proverbs to guide us, we would be “do-it-yourselfers.” We would be left to achieve goodness by ourselves.

If you are a no-nonsense, by the book, super-responsible, hyper-achiever—if you were a junior high hall monitor or residence assistant in your college dorm, Proverbs is your book. If you’ve spent any time around this people, you know they aren’t much fun. You also need to know this isn’t the life that Jesus came to give us.

Proverbs 31 describes a driven and dedicated woman who tirelessly provides for her husband, family, and community. She is wisdom and righteousness personified. She is the woman sung about in that old TV perfume commercial: “*She brings home the bacon, fries it up in a pan, and she’ll never let you forget that you’re a man. Cuz’ she’s a woman. W-O-M-A-N!*”

Mrs. Proverbs is a remarkable—she gathers wool and flax, then combs, cleans, and dyes it. She hauls tons of food home from far away places. She is up before the chickens to fix breakfast for her family and servants, and makes out “things-to-do” lists for her maids. In addition she deals in real estate, plants vineyards, makes wine, and markets and distributes it. Her lamp is on late at night as she sews clothing for her family from the wool she sheared from the sheep, which she then combed, cleaned, dyed, and spun into yarn.

After she finishes their clothes she makes her own out of fine purple linen. Then she makes clothing to sell. In addition to being a cook, a seamstress, a real estate agent, a wine producer and distributor, and clothing retailer, she is a teacher of wisdom.

Mrs. Proverbs manages everything on the home front so her husband can spend the day sitting among the elders discussing spiritual, political, and philosophical matters, while boasting to his buddies about having found the “*good woman who is hard to find.*”

“*Good*” is an inadequate description of her. She is Martha Stewart, Betty Crocker, Heloise, Miss Manners, and Oprah stitched together in one person. She exists to meet the needs and expectations of others and runs herself ragged trying. The bar is set high, way too high, but it’s the standard she strives for.

I have a question for the women of the church. Do you want to live up to her standard? Over the centuries women have tried, or have been told to try. A 1955 issue of Good Housekeeping featured an article titled, “The Good Wife’s Guide.” This is what it said:

HAVE DINNER READY. Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal (especially his favorite dish) is part of the warm welcome needed.

PREPARE YOURSELF. Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.

BE A LITTLE GAY AND MORE INTERESTING FOR HIM. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it.

CLEAR AWAY THE CLUTTER. Make one last trip through the main part of the house just before your husband arrives.

A man probably wrote this. I wonder how many women *aspired* to follow Mrs. Proverb's example and *expired* trying? Those were the days and still are the days, and not just for women.

How many people identify themselves as Christians, and yet sweat and fret and toil their way through life as if self-worth is an achievement? How many Christians say they are saved by God's grace, but practically speaking, cannot shake the lesson drilled into them early on that worth is determined by good grades, working for extra credit, graduating at the top of the class, and living a successful, productive life?

How many of us can confidently claim that our significance is not calculated according to our OUTPUT but God's INPUT? How many of us have the notion that God's main concern is, "*What*

***have you done for me lately?"* instead of, "Are you grateful for what I have done for you for no other reason than I love you?"**

It was the summer of 1981. I was one month away from returning to seminary after spending an intern year working with Paul Robinson in the Crest Manor Church of the Brethren. One Sunday before I left for church, Paul's wife Mary called and said something was wrong with Paul. He had been falling for some reason. "You may have to help him to the pulpit," she said.

Paul was a seminary president, a professor, a pastor, and in my estimation, the finest preacher the Church of the Brethren ever had. He was a big man with a big personality. He always stood out in a crowd. I arrived at church, knocked on his study door and looked inside. There sat Paul behind his desk, his head down, looking totally dejected. "Mary said you could use some help this morning." "It's all right," he replied. "I'll work through it."

When it was time for him to preach, I held my breath and sat on the edge of my chair, poised to jump up and steady him if necessary. He took three steps and his three hundred pound frame collapsed on the floor. The congregation gasped, and I rushed to help him up. "Get me into the pulpit and I'll be all right," he said. Then, in his typical, confident manner, he smiled to the congregation and said, "*As you can see, I don't have a good leg to stand on.*" He leaned on the pulpit, and proceeded to preach another gem.

Paul had diabetic neuropathy. He spent the next year in a wheel chair. Not long afterward, he lost a leg. It was a hard adjustment for him. He was a shaker and mover-- always on the go, and always productive. Throughout Paul's ministry he preached the power of God's grace, and how God is always able when we are unable. Now he could no longer reach the bar he had set.

Afterward, Paul struggled with depression, but came to realize his need for a redeemer—a need that he, AND WE forget when we're caught up in chasing achievement. God's grace cannot be used as an excuse for being pew potatoes. We are Jesus'

servants. He warned us that the work we do for our little kingdoms will turn to dust in the wind, while the work we do for his Kingdom has eternal significance.

Jesus never used the over-achieving sister in Proverbs 31 as a role model. We need Martha's around the house and church to get things done that need to be done. But we need practice to be like Mary. We need to take a time-out to sit at Jesus' feet, to listen, and rest, and not have a cow if the salad fork is on the wrong side of the plate, or the cake falls, or you are second in sales for the month.

From Jesus' perspective, there's nothing commendable about doing everything yourself and not helping others discover how they can serve. God doesn't smile when you neglect to take a Sabbath rest to which God subjected himself. God does not see getting stressed-out, burned-out, and depressed and anxious as a badge of honor. There's nothing good about losing your life if you lose it for the wrong reasons.

Mrs. Proverbs was a remarkable woman. We don't know what became of her... just that she never asked for help and presumably didn't get any. She toughed it out by herself and probably died before her time. Jesus made us his servants, but does not expect us to do it all ourselves. He didn't come to double our burdens. He came to take them away—all those burdens we endure in order to save ourselves.

In seminary I took a class on parables. Part of the requirement was to write our own parables. A student from Nigeria named Mamadu Mshelbila wrote this one:

A long, long time ago, there lived a man and his wife. This man was proud of his ability and achievements. One day he decided to go hunting. When he went to the bush he saw a gazelle at a distance, the swiftest animal in Nigeria. He took his bow and arrow and shot at the gazelle. After some time, he felt as if he was wasting his arrow poison. Therefore, he ran and caught the arrow in the sky before it reached the gazelle. The gazelle was

still running, but the man ran after him and caught him and killed him. He brought the gazelle home.

When he came to his compound, he called to his wife and handed the gazelle to her over the fence. Before he could walk 100' around the compound gate and enter his house, his wife had already done the following: 1) she skinned the gazelle; 2) she cut all the best parts of the meat; 3) she got some firewood and put it on the table, waiting for her husband to come and eat. By the time the husband came in, the food that was hot was now cold.

What a woman! Her husband's achievements were considerable, but try hard as he might, he could never top her. Try as hard as we might, we can't get it without Jesus. What a Savior!