August 3/4, 2019

Women of Valor

Skillful Living Series

Proverbs 31:1-31

Pastor Bryan Clark

This morning we finish the last chapter of Proverbs; we'll have covered at least part of all 31 proverbs. Proverbs 31 is fairly familiar as—the Proverbs 31 woman. So, here's what we have: a sixty-year-old man describing the ideal woman. What could possibly go wrong with that? *(laughter)* But is it possible we haven't quite understood Proverbs 31 correctly? Well, that's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs 31. In order to understand the more familiar part of this proverb, it's helpful to understand the first part—verses 1-9—that kind of sets the tone for what is to follow; so, we'll work our way through it quickly:

> **The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught him:** (*NASB, Prov. 31:1)

So, nobody knows who this king is; there's different ideas, but nobody really knows. An **oracle** is kind of like a sermon, a lesson—maybe today we'd think of it as a lecture. The mom's giving her son a lecture that is a bit of a warning. Verse 2:

> **What, O my son?**
> **And what, O son of my womb?**
> **And what, O son of my vows?**
> **Do not give your strength to women,**
> **Or your ways to that which destroys kings.**
> **It is not for kings, O Lemuel,**
> **It is not for kings to drink wine,**
> **Or for rulers to desire strong drink,** (Vs. 2-4)

So what she's talking about there is, in the ancient world it was very common for kings to use their power and position to live very immoral, selfish lifestyles. We would call it today: "Wine, Women, and Song," and her concern is that her son, as king, is going to live that way. The concern, then, is expressed in verse 5:

> **For they will drink and forget what is decreed,**
> **And pervert the rights of all the afflicted.**

So, the idea is that if you live this selfish, self-indulgent, immoral lifestyle, you won't do your job, and you have a really important job. There are people that are depending on you to put forth justice, for you to protect the weak and the vulnerable and the afflicted. So this is the concern: if you live that way, you won't do your job, and if you don't do your job, lots of people are going to suffer as a result. Verse 6:

> **Give strong drink to him who is perishing,**
> **And wine to him whose life is bitter.**
> **Let him drink and forget his poverty**
> **And remember his trouble no more.** (Vs. 6-7)

So, verses 6 and 7 are a bit confusing. It almost sounds like what she's saying is those that are poor and afflicted ought to just drink and get intoxicated and forget their problems. But we know that's contrary to everything else he says in the Book of Proverbs. Verses 6 and 7 are highly sarcastic, and what she's basically saying is, "If you, as the king, have no real problems and are going to live that way, the least you can do is give your alcohol to the poor and the afflicted because their lives are going to be miserable. Because you're doing a lousy job as a king, *they* might as well drink their lives away. So that's kind of the idea—there's all this sarcasm—if you're not going to do your job, their lives will be miserable; therefore, they need the alcohol more than you do. So that's what she's saying. That's confirmed then in verse 8:

> **Open your mouth for the mute,** (in other words, do your job)
> **For the rights of all the unfortunate.**
> **Open your mouth, judge righteously,**
> **And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.** (Vs. 8-9)

So, the last appeal is again: "Do your job as king; there are a lot of people depending on you." That's then where the conversation shifts to this idea that rather than: "Wine, Women, and Song," if you find this virtuous, this godly, this excellent wife, she'll be an ally; she'll be a partner, and you can be an honorable king. So, that's why it then shifts into this final conversation.

Now the way this is organized, there are two important parts to it: One is it's an *acrostic*. So, from verse 10 on, it's an acrostic that's organized around the Hebrew alphabet. So, if we're just going to use the English alphabet, then verse 10 starts with the letter 'A', verse 11 with the letter 'B', and verse 12 with the letter 'C' and so forth. So in a sense, what it is, is wisdom lived out from A to Z. That's kind of the idea of it. It provides like a review of the Book of Proverbs. So many of the things we've learned now are revealed in this ideal or excellent wife. It's kind of like the A through Z of the proverbs, flushed out in a person's life.

The second way this is organized is in what's called a *chiastic structure*. Without getting too far into the weeds on this, basically if you think of 'A' and then it's matched by 'B', matched by 'C' and at some point there's a focal point where it all comes together. So, you make these statements that all get to that peak, and then there's matching statements all the way back. So, the 'A's match; the 'B's match; the 'C's match, and it all gets you to this kind of crescendo moment. And at the point of crescendo, there is something significant that is said. In this case that's verse 23:

> **Her husband is known in the gates,**
> **When he sits among the elders of the land.**

So, again, this isn't actually written to women. It's a mother to her son explaining to her son that if he finds this excellent wife, it will provide this life where he can sit with great honor and dignity at the gates. So, with that in mind, then we move into the proverb itself.

One of the things that I think has often been confusing and causes women to walk away from Proverbs 31 really discouraged is, because we've misunderstood and thought everything in Proverbs 31 is meant to describe one woman. There isn't a woman on the planet that could pull all this off. You'd have to be *Wonder Woman* on steroids to do that. That's not the point. The point rather is understanding that in an ancient culture, women were primarily viewed as property, and the role of a woman was very, very small. She was kind of squeezed into this mold, and this is what you do. But, rather, Proverbs 31 is this beautiful celebration of God's handiwork in creating women very diverse, with all kinds of different talents and skills and abilities and calls. So, the excellent wife—

the virtuous woman—can manifest that through all these different talents, gifts, and abilities, and callings. So, rather than thinking you're supposed to do *all* of this, which will only leave you discouraged, realize you're kind of finding yourself in the proverb, and the proverb is celebrating you as the woman God has made you to be—and to be true to that. Verse 10:

An excellent wife, who can find?
(meaning they're the exception, not the rule; it's hard to find a woman like this)
For her worth is far above jewels.

That word **excellent**, different translations translate that word differently but literally, it's *a woman of valor*. It's a military term—a woman of courage. I chose that description as the title for this message because I think it helps to break loose from some of the ways we've interpreted this proverb. Basically the idea is, as a woman you're going to hear all kinds of voices to tell you what you should be as a woman. There's so much confusion in our culture around what it actually means to be a woman. So, you go out in the culture and you hear all these voices that tell you one thing, but honestly you can step into churches or religions and you hear different voices that try to squeeze you into a different mold. So the idea of *a woman of valor* is that you have the courage not to be squeezed into some mold other than just being true to follow your calling and to be the person God has called you to be. In order to do that, you have to be *a woman of valor*; you have to have courage to live that way. Verse 11:

The heart of her husband trusts in her,
And he will have no lack of gain.

That word **gain** is the Hebrew word *plunder*. So, again it's another military term. You think of the army going out with great valor and courage, conquering the enemy, bringing back the plunder, sharing it with the community. Her husband trusts in her and she goes out and brings back the plunder that then is shared with her family, her community. She brings great value to her family and her community. That's the idea there. Verse 12:

She does him good and not evil
All the days of her life.
She looks for wool and flax
And works with her hands in delight. (Vs. 12-13)

So, in the ancient world they didn't just go down the road to the department store and buy clothing. You had to make it or purchase it somewhere, but it was difficult to come by. So the idea is, she has the skills to go out to gather what she needs; she comes home, and she makes this clothing. So, she's a craftsman. She's good at what she does. She's creative, and she doesn't resent this. She actually finds great delight in doing this for her family!

I'm going to offer a side note that's just kind of related. I do think it's sad that we as a culture have become such consumers and such a throw-away generation. We buy it; we use it; we throw it away. I think there's something deeply lost when we live that way. As a matter of fact, the second attribute of God we learn about is that God is creative. The first is that God is eternal; then, "In the beginning, God created." There's something about getting your hands dirty. There's something about using your hands and creating and making things that grounds us; it humbles us. It actually connects us to God in a way few things do. There's something about it that's just good for our soul; that's a way that we celebrate what it means to be people made in the image of God. This is the

description of this woman: she goes out; she finds it; she gathers it; she makes it with hands. She's talented; she's creative; she finds great delight in doing this for her family. Verse 14:

She is like merchant ships;
She brings her food from afar.

So, just like these **ships** would bring supplies; it's just a metaphor that she goes out; she finds what she needs; she brings it home. The word in that verse used for **food** is actually the Hebrew word, *prey*. It's a picture of a lioness going out, finding the prey. So, with strength, with beauty, with skill, with cunning, the lioness finds what's needed, brings it home to provide for her cubs. It's a very strong, powerful, majestic kind of an image. Verse 15:

She rises also while it is still night,
And gives food to her household
And portions (probably better translated "and assignments") **to her maidens.**

This is the idea that she's diligent, that she's hard-working. She gets up before the sun rises. She works hard; she provides for her family; she gives assignments to her maidens; she manages the home. Now again, if you think about it, she is providing a review of things we've learned in the Book of Proverbs. The proverbs have talked a lot about being lazy, being idle, not doing your part. Proverbs has a really strong work ethic. So this excellent wife—this woman of valor—is diligent; she's driven by a true sense of calling. Now in the ancient world, primarily a wife was to raise the kids and then provide something to eat. So, kids, by the time they were in early adolescence, (maybe 12, 13, 14) they were adults and were on their own. It wasn't long until that responsibility was over. The result of that was these women struggled to find some sort of meaning and purpose to life. "Now what do I do all day?" And so many times, it was very common that they just consumed wine and were intoxicated most of the day. As a matter of fact, in many Old Testament passages and a few New Testament passages, there's actually specific language directed at women not to live this way. "Don't spend your days addicted to wine; live with a sense of meaning and purpose." But for that to happen, you have to kind of break the mold, kick out the boundaries, and have more of this sense of purpose and calling in life. So that's the idea here. She's to have a sense of calling, a sense of purpose. "Life is short; don't just waste it away." Verse 16:

She considers a field and buys it;
From her earnings she plants a vineyard.

Some of you would say, "You know, I'm not sure I'm wired to go out and collect what's needed and come home and make clothing." You're just wired differently than that. This is the idea of being a businesswoman. She's goes out; she looks around; she finds the ideal piece of land; she purchases it; she makes a profit; she invests it into a vineyard; she runs a business. This is a different wiring. This is a different skillset. This, again, is the celebration that this woman of valor doesn't fit in this little mold that we've created. Instead they're diverse and different, but still godly, still virtuous, still a woman that God celebrates. That's the idea. Verse 17:

She girds herself with strength
And makes her arms strong.

So, *girding* yourself is the idea of picking up your robe, tucking it in your belt in order to do something—for action—to run or to work. We'd probably say, "Roll up our sleeves". She rolls up her sleeves; she's strong, she works hard. Verse 18:

She senses that her gain is good;
Her lamp does not go out at night.

She works hard; she's diligent; she manages; she plans, and as a result of that, they have what they need. There's isn't this frantic, desperate anxiety day after day because they are just living on the edge. Rather, because of her diligence, because of her hard work, because of her managerial skills, they have what they need. The idea of the **lamp** not going out at night is not that she burns the candle at both ends and works night and day. That's not what it's saying. As a matter of fact, that'd be extremely unhealthy. It's saying that in order for the lamp to burn all night, (which was there for safety and protection) there had to be adequate oil in the lamp to last all night. So, again, it's a reflection of this idea that because she's planned, because she's worked hard, because she's prepared, there's plenty of oil to burn the lamp all night—and she know that, so she has this sense of calm or quiet to her. Verse 19:

She stretches out her hands to the distaff,
And her hands grasp the spindle.
She extends her hand to the poor,
And she stretches out her hands to the needy. (Vs19-20)

Verses 19 and 20 need to go together. The **distaff** and **spindle** were basically tools used in order to weave yarn or thread. So the idea is she **grasps** them in order to work hard, followed by the next verse. She closes her hands on her tools in order to open her hands to the **poor** and the **needy**. So, it's a bit of a play on words. If you think about our discussion related to shalom and flourishing and the righteous in the Book of Proverbs, the righteous were those who are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the larger community, to help in their contribution to shalom or flourishing. So, the idea here is she works hard, but not just to accumulate more and more stuff. She closes her hands on her tools in order to open her hands to the poor and the afflicted and the needy. This is part of her contribution to the larger community, to flourishing. This is just really a beautiful picture of her heart. Verse 21:

She is not afraid of the snow for her household, (Why? Because she's prepared)
For all her household are clothed with scarlet.
She makes coverings (which is like a bed covering) **for herself;**
Her clothing is fine linen and purple. (Vs. 21-22)

Now what's interesting about these two verses is the **scarlet** and **linen** and **purple**. These are very expensive items, so the idea is she's not just living paycheck to paycheck. She's not surviving with anxiety day to day. But, rather, because of her diligence, because of her skills, because of her hard work, because of her contribution, she's able to provide nice things for her family. It's just a good reminder that poverty is not a virtue. It doesn't impress God. Being a minimalist doesn't impress God. It's very similar to Paul's writing to Timothy—that if God has blessed you, then enjoy what you have. She works hard; she's diligent; the fruit of her labor is she's able to provide nice things for her family. Verse 23:

Her husband is known in the gates,
When he sits among the elders of the land.

So that's this crescendo moment to the structure. The oracle is to the son: "This is the kind of wife you should find, and if you do so, she will be a partner or an ally that will make it possible for you to be in a position of honor or influence in the community." That's the idea of verse 23:

She makes linen garments and sells *them*,
And supplies belts to the tradesmen.

Again, this is a businesswoman. She goes out and she finds things and she makes things, and she trades with the tradespeople that come through. Verse 25:

Strength and dignity are her clothing,
And she smiles at the future.

This is a woman that lives with a sense of calling. You have to understand that in a culture where women were so put down; they were so devalued, but this is a woman of valor; this is a woman with strength; this is a woman with dignity. This is a woman who is unwilling to listen to those voices and, as a result of that, life is not miserable for her like it was for most women. But she **smiles at the future** cause she has purpose; she has meaning to her life. She understands who God has made her to be. Everyday matters and she lives that way. Verse 26:

She opens her mouth in wisdom,
And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

Again, if you think of her as being the embodiment of what we've learned in Proverbs, probably more than any other subject, the subject of the tongue, the mouth—what comes out of our mouth—was the most discussed topic. So here's a woman, when **she opens her mouth**, out comes **wisdom**. When she opens her mouth, out comes **kindness**. She's just the embodiment of what Proverbs has talked about. Verse 27:

She looks well to the ways of her household,
And does not eat the bread of idleness.

In other words, whatever she's called to, you have a description of a woman that's pretty domestic; you have a woman who's a businesswoman, who's gifted and called in a different direction—but God would never call a wife to neglect her responsibilities as a wife. You would never call a woman to neglect her responsibilities as a mother. So that's the idea. She works hard; she lives with a sense of calling but is always true to ultimately the calling that God has put on her life. Verse 28:

Her children rise up and bless her;
Her husband also, and he praises her, *saying*:
"Many daughters have done nobly,
But you excel them all." (Vs. 28-29)

This is the idea that the people that know her best are the people that **rise up and praise her** and celebrate her. It's easy to put on a mask and pretend in public. People do it all day long. It's easy to go out in the marketplace and pretend to be somebody and pull it off. People do it all the time. But who you are at home, that's who you are! You just can't fake it at home. At home that's the real you. At home you are exposed. At home your true character comes out. So, when the people at home, who see you in your most real and vulnerable moments rise up and praise and celebrate you, there could not be higher praise than that. That's what he's saying there. Verse 30:

Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain,
The external can be managed, can be faked and it doesn't last.)
But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.

So back to Proverbs 1—this is where we started: "The fear of the Lord is," what? "the beginning of wisdom." She is the embodiment of *skillful living* that's been described in the Book of Proverbs. Verse 31:

Give her the product of her hands,
And let her works praise her in the gates.

One of the things that we've talked about a lot in the Book of Proverbs is that you ultimately have to live in the culture you create, whether that's a nation, a city, a community, a neighborhood, or a family. We as a nation have gone down a particular path: We've created an angry, toxic culture—nobody likes it—but this is the reality. When you're selfish, self-indulgent consumers, you create a culture you have to live in and it's not very pleasant. All the way down to the culture at home, you ultimately live in the culture you create. What verse 31 is saying is: ultimately her reward will not be monetary; it will not be a performance review; it will not be applause and celebration by lots of people. Her ultimate reward will be she lives in the culture she's created. She's created a culture of flourishing, and that will be the most meaningful reward she could have.

Again, it's really important to remember: the point of Proverbs 31 is not that any one woman should be all of that—it's virtually impossible! But rather, realizing in an ancient culture where women were so restricted and so limited, this was God blowing up the mold and saying, "Actually I've created women with such creativity, with such diversity, with such beauty that they can be lots of things and still be this virtuous woman of valor." The key is to be true to what God has called you to be—and that is very challenging in our culture.

So just a couple of closing thoughts. One of the things that just so saddens me about our culture is we have so devalued and diminished the call of a stay-at-home mom. In our desire to prove that women can be just as good as men, the mom that believes that she's called to stay at home and raise her kids—they're laughed at; they're mocked; they're devalued; they're diminished! "If you don't have what it takes to go to college, if you don't have what it takes to make it in the marketplace, maybe you can stay home and raise your kids." That's kind of how we see it as a culture. We have lost sight of the fact that this is such a high and holy calling. It's a calling that matters. Those little kids at home are needing a mom that loves them and is devoted to them and feels called to pour her life into them. We can't change how the culture views this, but certainly we together as a church can remember that this is a high and holy calling. Because here's the problem: I would suggest to you that it's far more difficult to be a stay-at-home mom than it is to work in the marketplace. Nobody's paying you. Nobody's celebrating you. Nobody's applauding you. Nobody's giving you a performance review. Almost everything that you do is going to go unappreciated. And you do it day after day, week after week, year after year; and frankly, nobody's applauding. Most of the time, nobody's paying attention. So, if you start to listen to the voices of the culture that tell you that you don't have value, that you're second rate, that you don't measure up—if you listen to these voices—you start to resent your calling; you start to feel under-appreciated. You start to feel like you have no value. You start to feel like nobody cares, and so you start to vent that, and where does that go? You vent it on your husband; you vent it on your kids. Now everybody's losing. That's why you have to be a woman of valor. That's why you have to be a woman of courage to not listen to the voices of the culture, but to be true to your calling.

But I think it's also true as the proverb has reminded us, that some women are gifted and called to the marketplace—not to neglect their families—it's just a different calling. That's how they are called; that's how they're wired. They don't love their kids less; they're not less of a mother. Some are called to go out and to buy fields and to sell them, to plant vineyards, and that's just how God's made them and wired them.

But here's a couple of things to think about: Hopefully what drives you, if that's your calling, is not the culture's value system—to prove you're just as good as a man. Hopefully your calling is not defined by this determination to find significance and value in what you do, is not driven by this kind of toxic anti-man culture that's driven by, "I'll show you!" Because eventually that attitude will just break down your marriage and it will just make things miserable at home. There's nothing about that, that's pleasing to God. It needs to be an honest, true calling—that this is how God has made me; this is how God has wired me; this is what God has called me to—and in the midst of that, you don't lose sight of your calling as a wife and mother, just like no man should lose sight of his calling as a husband and father.

I think it's also important to make sure that if you're called to the marketplace, it isn't just because you need the money. I hear this all the time. Couples say, "Well, I *have* to work." So, I think there are some couples where that's true. That's just a reality and you make the best of it. But oftentimes here's how we should finish the sentence: "I have to work in order to maintain the lifestyle we've become accustomed to," to which I would raise the question, "Really? You're going to choose stuff over your kids? That's the choice you want to make?" Sometimes it is necessary to step away from the spending of the culture and scale it way down and simplify life to fulfill your calling to be the mom and the dad that God has called you to be. This is a short season. It's here today and it's gone tomorrow. My prayer would be you'd never choose stuff over your kids.

Again, we don't want to squeeze all women into this little mold. The point of the proverb is just the opposite—to bust that out and realize women are very diverse in their giftedness, and in their abilities, and in their callings—and we should celebrate that! But it takes a lot of courage to ignore the voices that seek to squeeze you into a mold, and to have the courage to be the woman God has called you and created you to be, to live with the true sense of calling, whether you're married or whether you're single—to live with a true sense of calling. To do that, you have to be *A Woman of Valor.*

> *Our Father, we're thankful that You have reminded us that You have created women with such great creativity, such diversity of talents and skills and callings. God, this can get very confusing out in the culture and even within the church. God, my prayer is that every woman in the room would gain a clear sense of what You are calling them to, that they would have the courage to be a woman of valor, and to live life with a true sense of calling and purpose. For Your Glory, in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2019 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved