

**Sessions 7 – True Womanhood and the Work of Women in the Church
(Proverbs 31: 10 – 31)**

“A wife of noble character who can find?” Proverbs 31:10

- I. The “new woman” or “true womanhood.”
 - A. Over one hundred years ago, a debate emerged in churches of the restoration movement as to the nature (as well as the role) of women in Christ. Two basic positions anchored this debate.
 1. “True womanhood” – Fathers left the home for the workplace and women were left with the chief responsibility for maintaining the home and providing spiritual and moral training of children. The roles of wife, mother and homemaker were idealized (Victorian era). Attributes which were emphasized included purity, piety (perhaps moral superiority), submissiveness, and domesticity. There was also the implication that the ideal woman was passive, had little interest in sex, dependent, deferential and childlike (men were considered superior in mind and body). For this reason, women should not seek the right to vote.
 2. The “new” or “real” woman - Stressed the survival ethic of the working-class woman and encouraged women being physically fit, receiving a well-rounded education, and working outside the home (if necessary) while at the same time loyalty to family and home. Did not reject male headship. Did not support the women’s rights movement but did support women’s right to vote, women’s reform societies (such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union), and a more public role for women in the church. “She knows the world around her and takes an active part in it.”
 3. These two descriptions of the characteristics of the Christian woman probably reflect a reasonable spectrum of views among churches of Christ today. For example, the description of the “new” woman is pro-family yet encourages education and working outside the home (which would prepare the wife, if she were to lose her husband to death or divorce, as well as the single woman to meet the challenges of living without a mate). The description of the “true” woman emphasizes the focus of many Christian women today upon the centrality of the family in the woman’s life and especially the spirituality (piety) of the Christian woman.
 - B. Proverbs 31 provides insight into the nature of women in the Old Testament and is relevant to this longstanding debate regarding the ideal nature of Christian women.
- II. The Status of Women in the Ancient Near East.

- A. Status as wife – A girl was expected to marry on reaching puberty. Betrothal arrangements were usually made by the father yet the girl had some freedom in the choice of a husband. There probably was mutual love and warmth between husband and wife (unlike some texts would lead us to believe). The wife was expected to care for the husband and his household and present him with children. Wives worked actively at household chores. Though polygamy was accepted, monogamy was the rule among persons who were not from royalty. Sterility was almost always considered the fault of the wife (and could lead to a concubine or divorce). If she was widowed, her care fell to her sons. The beauty and charm of women were typically valued (love poems of Egypt and Mesopotamia).
- B. Economic status – A woman could own property (bought, sold and leased fields) and invest income from the property. They might develop a cottage industry (such as textiles). They might work outside the home in food and textile industries. Almost all women were uneducated formally.
- C. Legal status – Rape was punishable by death when the woman was married or betrothed or when the man used force. If a man sought a divorce through no fault of the woman he usually had to pay a fine. A wife who was abused could deny her husband conjugal rights. In the case of adultery, the woman was always considered the guilty party.
- D. Religious status – Women played a minor role in cultic life. Sacred prostitution was practiced in some places. Women, however, were prominent as prophets.
- E. Political status – Women from all strata of society on occasions ascended to the leadership of their countries (e.g. a low born female tavern keeper was the founder of the Third Dynasty of Kish).

III. The worthy woman. (Proverbs 31: 10 – 31)

A. Basic comments on the text.

1. This is an acrostic poem -- a poem in which the first letters of successive lines in Hebrew appear in alphabetical order (each of the 22 verses begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order, perhaps making this easy to memorize -- see Psalms 112.) This is the most complimentary passage about women in the Old Testament.
2. The author of this section is apparently King Lemuel (perhaps a symbolic name for Solomon or an “ideal king” – means dedicated to God) but the section has been anticipated earlier in the book (18:22). The woman described is probably not a specific person but rather an ideal type (Lemuel was warned about another type of woman by his mother – 31:2,

- 3). The admonitions of a faithful mother are followed by the praise of a wife of noble character.
3. Although polygamy was permitted under the law, we see no hint of it in this passage (or in the entire book of Proverbs).
4. There is little evidence that the woman in this text is in any way the “weaker” sex. (v. 17) The woman is said to be wise (as the women of Tekoa [II Samuel 14:2]) but for the most part is praised for her industry and economic abilities (not necessarily considered feminine qualities).
5. She has not usurped authority in the family nor oppressed the poor given her independence (as did the Samaritan women in Amos 4:1), but rather works in the service of her family and the poor.
6. Nevertheless, she is most independent, especially given customs in the East during this time (contrast with an Egyptian proverb of the fifth century BC, “Let your wife regard your wealth; do not trust her with it”).

B. The text.

1. “A wife of noble character” – means strength of character and assumes an active force. (v. 10 --see Ruth 3:11 where the phrase is also used). “Who can find?” A rhetorical question (an exclamation of praise) – compare with Proverbs 20:6.
2. She is a “liberated woman” but has not turned her back on the family. In fact, her husband has full confidence in her (this is what is meant by “the heart of her husband trusts in her” in some translations).
3. Though her husband is head of the family, he has left household (and business) management to her. (v. 11) She manages affairs very well. (v. 12) He apparently is involved in political and spiritual matters (he sits at the center of public activity). There is no evidence that their roles clash.
4. She not only labors, she enjoys her labor. (v. 13)
5. She does not stay at home (like the merchant ships, she brings things to the home from afar, that is, buying in the best markets, even if they are at some distance). (v. 14)
6. A lamp is always burning during the night in Eastern houses. Because it was small, the woman must arise during the night to replenish the oil and at that time often began her daily tasks (Man may work from sun to sun, but woman’s work is never done). (v. 15)
7. She buys a field. This is more responsibility than usually indicated in the Old Testament for women (and more status). Except under certain circumstances, women could not own property and the circumstance described here would probably not qualify (v. 16)
8. Strength and vigor (v. 17) may sound somewhat strange for the “weaker sex” yet it indicates this woman prepares herself for unhindered work (she rolls up her sleeves).
9. She evaluates her work with satisfaction (v. 18). She continues her work into the night, perhaps because she feels good about her work.

10. Even though this woman appears to be of high rank, she works hand in hand with her servant girls (she stretches out her hands to useful work). (v. 19)
11. The woman shares her prosperity and from the context, it appears she shares this independently. Literally, she opens her arms to the needy. (v. 20) Her life is home centered, but not confined to her own home. She takes an active interest in the community.
12. The houses were not heated except for a small pot of charcoal. Scarlet was chosen because it absorbs the heat. It snows on average about two times a year in Jerusalem (just a ground cover) but it can snow more. Climate in Jerusalem is very similar to Raleigh. (v. 21)
13. She dresses and makes clothe suited to her station in life (she is neither excessively plain nor ostentatious in her dress for purple was valuable but her clothes were linen, not silk). (V. 22)
14. Her husband sits in the opening of the gates (the chief place of public life). It is her industry which permits him to do so, that is, she is partially responsible for his position at the opening of the city gates. (v.23)
15. She makes linen, again a reference to her industry. Her products are not ordinary. What she makes here is probably a girdle for women which was a luxury item. (v. 24)
16. She is invested with a moral force which protect her against care and worry. Because of this (and her industry) she has no fear of the future but rather laughs at what may come. (v. 25)
17. She is not without intellect and wisdom. She is not merely a good housewife, attending to the material interests of the family. Perhaps this wisdom derives from her ability to look after her household and her concerned for the poor, that is, a practical wisdom. (v. 26)
18. Her eyes are turned everywhere in concern for her household. She never ceases being diligent and conscientious. (v. 27)
19. She is praised by her children and her husband (her work does not go unnoticed). She is not a "trophy wife", for she is not praised for her beauty or charm. (v. 28)
20. This verse (v. 29) appears to be spoken by her husband. She is praised for her noble character, her excellence.
21. Beauty, charm and perhaps sexual attractiveness are not mentioned among her positive qualities (in fact, they are considered misleading in judging her worth). She is not praised for her knowledge of scripture nor for her spiritual leadership, yet she clearly is a faithful believer in the Lord. (v. 30)
22. Her works speak for themselves (literally the fruit of her hands) and she should be given the benefit of her labors. Use of her hands is mentioned many times in this section. If the author literally means that she should be praised in the gates, this would be extraordinary in the East during this period of history. (v. 31)

C. Comments upon the text.

1. The picture painted of the wife of noble character is an ideal picture. Many women described in the O.T. might have come close to the description in Proverbs (Miriam [Micah 6:4], Deborah [Judges 4, 5], Ruth, Abigail [I Samuel 25], Esther, the Shunammite woman [II Kings 4: 8 – 37], and Huldah [II Kings 22:14]). These women were exceptional but perhaps the woman in Proverbs was the ideal to which any woman might aspire.
2. Most commentators note that there is a clear division of labor indicated in this text. The clear division is that the woman had many responsibilities but she was not the spiritual/political leader of the family or the community (she was not called to sit at the city gate). (This woman is not a Deborah, leading Israel.) The primary responsibilities of the woman were domestic, though the boundaries of the domestic stretched far beyond the home itself. Israel remained a patriarchy.
3. Regardless, her activities were widespread and included buying and selling, manufacturing and land ownership.
4. The text refers to a married woman and we cannot abstract the role of the single woman from the text easily. Nevertheless, the independence of the married woman in this text might suggest that the characteristics described would apply to the single woman (except in reference to the husband).

IV. Conclusions from the text.

- A. Even in patriarchal Israel, the activities of the woman of noble character were widespread and clearly were more similar to the “new” woman than the “true” woman. The influence of Victorian society (and the Victorian ideal) upon the early Restoration movement is real and must be considered when seeking to understand the characteristics of the ideal Christian woman. In fact, the O.T. suggests many models for both women in extraordinary situations (such as Deborah) and women who were in ordinary situations (such as the woman of noble character in Proverbs).
- B. The conflict within the Restoration movement regarding the role of women during the 19th century, however, was not present in Israel in relationship to the activities of the noble woman. Rather, the sinful woman is singled out as causing strife, e.g. Proverbs 6:20 – 35.
- C. The characteristics of the woman of noble character that might be abstracted from the text in Proverbs 31 include:
 1. She is independent in most matters.
 2. She is energetic (not a picture of the “weaker sex”).
 3. She has far reaching responsibilities (especially economic).
 4. She is active beyond the boundaries of the home.

5. She is concerned for the welfare of persons beyond the boundaries of the home.
6. She exhibits practical wisdom (not necessarily “woman’s intuition”).
7. She is a teacher (probably in the home and probably usually through example).
8. She is primarily focused upon the welfare of the family.
9. Her role is primarily that of a wife and mother.
10. She fears the Lord.
11. She is known for her works.
12. She is not focused upon physical beauty or charm.

D. These characteristics must be considered in light of a new covenant, yet they are remarkable in and of themselves given the status of women in the ancient Near East.

References

1. Craig, D: A Worthy Woman. Salem Oregon, Valor Press, 1983.
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