

Wisdom in practice - the wife of noble character

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 March 2014

Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] Good. Okay, so I've put up on the slide there the well-known words of Jesus. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

! You might not immediately see the connection with this passage, but I hope you will by the end. So Proverbs finishes with this acrostic.

It's actually an acrostic. Each verse starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's obviously titled The Noble Wife, or The Wife of Noble Character.

And it's really a summary of all the teaching in this book. It's a case study, if you like, of wisdom in practice, or perhaps one might say wisdom in action.

And just in case you've missed this point, this is what Proverbs is getting at. Look what the writer actually says here, in the beginning of verse 10, A wife of noble character who can find she is worth far more than rubies.

[1 : 15] Well, who is it that is worth far more than rubies? This will we remember from earlier on in the book. It is, of course, wisdom herself. She is more precious than rubies.

Nothing you desire can compare with her. So that's Proverbs 3.15 and also Proverbs 8.11.

Proverbs 20.15 says, So this passage is, if you like, the goal, the target of my son.

You remember the book of Proverbs is addressed to a young man starting out on life and his way into town. And he's told by his parents that he's going to meet these two women, wisdom and the adulteress.

And the question is, which one will he hook up with? And the parents are keen to recommend that he seeks out wisdom.

And so at the end of the book, we have this description of wisdom, if you like. This is the target, the thing that the person, the woman, if you like, that the young man is supposed to be seeking out.

[2 : 40] And if we look at it, we find dignity and sound instruction and true and honest wealth. And those are all the marks of wisdom, as they're described in chapters 8 and 9.

And by contrast, just briefly, we're reminded again of the adulteress in verse 30. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, or actually more literally vain.

Something that is meaningless, has little depth. But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

So we have right at the end here that contrast, just briefly again, between the adulteress and the wife of noble character of wisdom.

And so it's not surprising here that in this passage, we actually find the same themes as we find throughout the book of Proverbs. The virtues of hard work and honest trade and sound organisation.

And above all, wise instruction. A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. On her tongue are found wisdom and sound instruction, we're told.

[3 : 51] So how are we to understand this passage? And I would suggest to you actually that, as it's true of most of Proverbs, you can actually interpret it at different levels.

It's a thing we're supposed to think about, to meditate on, and learn from it in different ways. And so I would suggest there's at least three ways we can look at this.

Just to be traditional, I've got you three Ps from Proverbs. We can think of it as, obviously, what it is at face value, a pattern for a godly wife.

And we can think of it as a picture of a well-organised society, summing up what we've been reading in Proverbs. But I think most importantly of all, we may think of it as a promise of fruitfulness.

If we seek out wisdom. And that's, so I really want to look at all three of those. And well, and we'll see as they go through how we can get those things from this passage.

[5 : 03] So I think even if we look, read it at the most basic level, as just a pattern for a godly wife. It's quite radical stuff, actually.

I think it doesn't always say things we expect at all. I once showed this to a feminist acquaintance of mine, and her reaction was to take it as a kind of domestic slavery, a woman tied to the house. It just shows you, really, how often we read into things rather than seeing what the writer is actually saying. Because it clearly doesn't say anything of the sort. And yet we find even some Christian interpreters who have made this passage say that a woman is supposed to be tied to a house and home and family.

And, you know, almost shouldn't be doing anything else. But it really doesn't say that. And if you're a woman on the verge of marriage, I guess we have two of those here this evening, you might read this interpretation, and frankly, you're more likely to be intimidated than encouraged, I would think. But certainly, this is an impressive woman. As I might say, it's a woman in executive mode. There's only one reference to the children in verse 28, and then they rise up and call her blessed.

[6 : 30] So, although she doesn't seem to be spending enormous amounts of time with them, she's certainly not neglecting them. She provides food for her family, but it says portions for her servant girls, so I don't think it's the cooking so much as is in view here as the organising of it.

Perhaps she does cook it herself, but it's mainly a matter of making sure that the family is properly provided for. And has the things it needs. Remarkably, perhaps, she's economically independent. Did you notice this in verse 16? It says, she considers a field and buys it. Out of her earnings, she plants a vineyard.

I think actually, personally, I think joint accounts are a good idea, but I certainly don't think that the husband should be keeping very close track of the wife's finances in the wrong way.

I mean, most, of course, most families do share their finances, but it's certainly not the suggestion that the wife is not competent to handle finance or anything like that.

[7 : 46] On the contrary, she seems to be very astute financially and very independent financially. It's out of her own earnings that she buys a field and develops the plants of vineyard.

She manages the household, verse 27. She's no domestic slave.

She extends succor to the needy, verse 20. She does that herself. Doesn't sort of, you know, push her husband out to do it.

She does that herself, it says. In verse 16, as we've already noted, she buys a field and plants a vineyard. Even in this electronic age, we would find it difficult to buy a field without going and visiting it and organising it.

And I don't suppose it suggests she actually dug it herself, but she would have had to have got the workmen organised and make it work.

[8 : 51] She certainly would have had to get out to do it. And she's an effective trader, we see in verse 24. Again, she could hardly have done this if she was, spent all her time in the house and never went out.

If you're going to sell stuff, you need to get out there and sell it to the merchants who are passing by. And especially, that must have been true.

Remember in those days, they didn't even have telephones, let alone websites. Even they didn't have a proper postal service, as far as I'm aware. So, if she's selling sashes to the merchants, she must have been out, come in, she must have been out there talking to them.

So, this is certainly not a woman who's tied to the kitchen sink. She's a project manager, she's an effective trader. Noted that she selects wool and flax in verse 13.

There's no way she could have done that without going and visiting the suppliers, the shepherds and the harvesters. So, an obvious word to the husbands.

[9 : 58] If you want a wife like this, you need to give her the freedom to operate and the trust that she deserves. Notice how she's described. She's clothed with strength and dignity.

She certainly says that. She's clothed with strength and dignity. But in fact, she's also clothed with fine linen and purple. We see in verse 22.

She's not driven to sort of subjection and poverty by her husband or by her family. And it says, she can laugh at the days to come because she's no fear of the cold weather.

The whole household is clothed and set with the best materials. It says scarlet in our translation. Another translation apparently is double thickness.

They've got extra thick clothes that even if it snows, I don't think it snows very often in Palestine, but even if it does, she's prepared and her family is prepared.

[11:03] If she's going to produce goods that the merchants will fight to get their hands on, she's going to need the best spinning wheel and the best loom, isn't she? Verse 19. Her family is well organised because even her servant girls are well prepared for.

Now maybe, like most Western families, I guess your household doesn't run to housemaids who do the cooking and cleaning. But remember, husbands, you can always go the technology route. You can get a dishwasher, not for the sake of having stuff for the sake of it, because life doesn't consist, we're told, in the abundance of possessions which become a substitute for God, but if that makes us more productive in the kingdom, then get a dishwasher, get a washing machine, get a Hoover. And in fact, if she's going to sell sashes to the merchants nowadays, she's going to need a decent computer and a website, isn't she? So, if you want a wife like that husband, encourage her, don't discourage her and make her spend all the time scrubbing the floor.

And yet, ladies, I'd suggest to you, this isn't a feminist have-it-all. This woman is family and community-oriented, as it seems her husband is also.

She doesn't put her career before her family, rather it's to the benefit of the family, as we saw earlier when we looked at the family. It's to the benefit of the community of the family as a whole. She has a concern for those who depend on her, verses 11 and 15, but also for those who are outside her immediate circle.

[12:46] And that might be the destitute neighbour, verse 20, the poor and needy, but it might even be the rich merchant that she's trading with in verse 24. In fact, I would suggest to you, what strikes one above all about this woman is her poise and balance.

She seems totally balanced, totally in control, on top of things. And above all we read, she speaks with wisdom and faithful instruction is on her tongue, verses 25 and 26.

She's industrious, but she's not obsessive. She's competent, yet she's calm and good-humoured, verse 25. She laughs at the times to come. She doesn't neglect her appearance, verse 22.

She's clothed in fine linen and purple, yet her beauty is much more than skin deep. She's watchful, verse 27.

She watches over the affairs of her household, but she isn't a control freak. Do you know she can't do anything about the weather, the light snow, so she prepares for it.

[14:00] She's prudent, verse 18. She sees that her trading is profitable and her lamp doesn't go out at night. I'm not sure, I couldn't quite work out whether that means she works at night or whether she means she's got the oil so her lamp doesn't run out, but either way, it means she's prudent about what she does.

But yes, she's also generous, as we saw. She's also able to help those who are in need. Who wouldn't want to be a part of this woman's circle, even if it's only as a housemaid?

Verse 15. This woman is a full and essential partner in the family enterprise, and her husband really values her. And because hubby himself is not stressed about micromanaging her affairs, he finds time to participate in the politics of the city.

See this in verse 23. Her husband is respected at the city gate where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. The city gate, of course, is where the city council would have met in those days. So, what does her husband have to say when he gets to the council and gets up to give his maiden speech? Well, it tells us in verse 33, actually, doesn't it?

[15:25] Not 33, that can't be right, there isn't a verse 33. Verse 31, sorry. Tells us, doesn't he? Gentlemen, I'd like to present to you the example of my wife.

In fact, I would suggest to you that if we only ran the city the same way as my wife runs her household, we'd all be a lot better off and a lot happier. Because I think, actually, this is not just a model of a family that's presented here.

It's a model of a well organised godly community. And what we see particularly about this community is that it's a community that cares.

And as I've already mentioned, the themes here are the themes of the whole book. It's a vision for a just and a happy society. So this lady is caring about providing the basic necessities of life for everyone, even those who are below her on the social scale.

We notice that she provides, this mistress is the servant of her servants. She provides the food for her maidens. She cares about benevolent management, verse 27.

[16:46] She watches over the affairs of her household. She cares about sound planning. Verse 21, when it snows, she has no fear for her household, for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

This is what our communities should be doing. She cares about sound government as such. Her husband is a politician. She cares about education, verse 26.

Sound instruction is on her tongue. She cares about community spirit and morale in verse 28. this is the morale of her family but surely it's saying more than that.

A community, any community should rise up and call their leaders blessed and one another blessed if it is a real caring community and the less caring the community is the less happy the people in it will be.

and she cares for those who everyone else dismisses for the poor and needy, verse 20. Again, so often that's forgotten in our communities.

[18:01] And what's more, it's not all done in a sort of grudging and minimal way, is it? It's all done with verve and industry. If you read verse 14 to 18, it tells us she gets up while it's still dark and so on.

She's like the merchant ships bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it's still dark providing food for her family. She considers a field and buys it out of her earnings. She plants a vineyard and so on.

It makes you exhausted just reading it, doesn't it? So it's done efficiently.

It cares. This community cares about efficiency and quality. And it's not just utilitarian either. She makes coverings for her bed. She's clothed in fine linen and purple.

It's interested in art and craft and producing things that are of good quality. not just basic. And it's a community that values efficiency and quality perhaps we might say.

[19:07] And it's outward looking. Verse 24 supplies the merchant with sashes. Community needs to think about its links with surrounding communities and helping and dealing with them.

And it's confident isn't it? Verse 25 she's clothed with strength and dignity. She can laugh at the days to come. Again if our communities are founded on wisdom they will be confident.

They will laugh at the days to come. Not because they can control everything. Things like snow will happen. But they're prepared and they can trust in the Lord that things will be dealt with.

And above all and I put on the slide there this is a community this is a lady and her family is a community that cares about people.

The whole thing you notice is people oriented. Even when it's talking about trading it's with the relationships with the merchants.

[20:19] Even when she's talking about herself in a sense she's clothed in fine linen and purple. It's about people. What she wears rather than other things that might have been signs of riches.

She provides food for her family and for the servant girls. This is a community above all that cares about people. Husband, family, employees, business colleagues, the poor and needy.

And all of them are treated with courtesy and respect. And where does all this come from? Well as in everything in Proverbs this wisdom proceeds from the fear of the Lord.

Verse 30 A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Remember this is the chorus that runs all through Proverbs the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

And yet perhaps we're sitting there now feeling a little bit uncomfortable. Is the real world quite like that? We might think. In fact gentlemen I've got some bad news for you.

[21:30] I don't think this paragon of feminine virtue really exists. In fact the clue perhaps is in the text in verse 10 says a wife of noble character who can find she's worth far more than rubies.

you might find it easier to make your fortune down a diamond mine than to locate this girl. And even suppose by some remote chance you did manage to find her.

Well I can tell you she's going to have a lot more sense than to marry you isn't she? You'd be right out of her league. So yes this does tell you what to look for if you're seeking a wife or a husband and yes this wife I'm sure is a better noble the wife of noble character is a better role model for women than any TV domestic goddess or have it all feminist superwoman.

And yet I'd like to remind you of the words of a woman who was noted always for having wisdom and faithful instruction on her tongue Edith Schaefer the wife of course of Frances Schaefer she wrote several books about family life one quoted from there what is a family another one about hidden art which perhaps relates to this business of making coverings for a bed and clothed in fine linen and purple they're both worth reading as are other books but she did say the following there

are all sorts of versions of this quotation I can't find my copy of what is a family so I had to look on the internet but this I think is the correct quotation and it's quite a good version of it anyway and it says the following when people insist on perfection or nothing then they get nothing well that makes sense doesn't it if you say you're going to have perfection or nothing you know what you're going to get so men remember that your wife is only human and praise her anyway and women

I must say don't drive yourself into stress and guilt by chasing some mirage of domestic perfection because that would make you exactly the opposite of this calm confident woman wouldn't it she laughs at the days to come so often women who spend their time and put their focus on their family and household just get stressed over it just feel guilty that their children are not perfect models of happy shiny children again just as the this lady doesn't exist that perfect child doesn't exist either I can tell you that so don't drive yourself into guilt by chasing some mirage of perfection do what you can but don't trust in woolly jumpers if it snows and burning the candle at both ends getting up before it's dark and carrying on late into the night because your heavenly father knows that you need these things so rather put your confidence in God so that actually makes us think doesn't it why does this book of proverbs that's so much immersed in the everyday life so realistic as the wisdom literature always is so embedded in gritty reality why does it end as it does why do we have that pattern of kingship that we were looking at last week that no human ruler has ever matched and why do we have this picture of a beautiful woman if we're told she's unobtainable who can find her is it some vision of what should be but never can be is it some utopian dream of Avalon or a memory of a golden age which actually never existed but I'd like to suggest to you that it's not that at all what it is in fact is a promise of real fruitfulness because we read don't we there was a husband who went looking for his bride and he looked not just down in a diamond mine but in the depths of the grave itself and when he found her it wasn't like Euridici dancing with the blessed spirits what he found was a shriveled mutilated corpse do you like those CSI programs

[26 : 35] CSI and silent witness the props and makeup guys have a field day don't they when they produce these models of these mutilated bodies they're absolutely hideous some of them and yet that's what the Lord Jesus found that his bride looked like I always have to look away when they get to the cutting up part I'd never make a pathologist too squeamish so what happens the scientists can look inside can't they and with care and dedication they can piece together what happened who was this person how did she die that's a useful and even a noble task in itself but there's one thing the crime lab can't do and that's to bring that shriveled corpse back to life they can't restore health and beauty to that pile of dried up bones and torn flesh but there is one who can and that's the Lord Jesus he's the one who as pictured in Ezekiel prophesies to the bones and they live and he says that whoever you are whatever it was that killed you I can make you into that wife of noble character it's a promise of fruitfulness and so we can remember what sorry it's the wrong way what Paul wrote husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless in the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies he who loves his wife loves himself after all no one ever hated his own body but feeds and cares for it just as Christ does the church so Christ has promised that he will present her radiant the church radiant and beautiful recall those words of Jesus himself that I put on the first slide blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and it comes with a promise doesn't it for they will be filled or another thing that Jesus said John 15 4 and 5 remain in me and I will remain in you no branch can bear fruit by itself it must remain in the vine neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me I am the vine you are the branches if a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit apart from me you can do nothing what we find at the end of proverbs here is a promise of beauty not just for a married woman but for the whole church of Christ and it's not the fleeting frenetic charm of the adulteress which is deceptive and a beauty that's fleeting it's the mature calm eternal beauty of wisdom herself it's not the hopeless despairing dream of fulfillment that folly and the world offer come in here for instant satisfaction it's not that that's promised but a promise of genuine worth that's found only through wisdom through Jesus

Christ and then through that through Christ we find something that's genuinely praiseworthy verse 28 her children arise and call her blessed her husband also and he praises her many women do noble things but you surpass them all charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised give her the reward she's earned and let her works bring her praise

in the city gate the key there as always is a woman who fears the Lord a woman who calls on Christ and to my son also so it's men as well as women the key is to call on the name of the Lord he who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved but Jesus himself promised that if a man remains in me and I in him he will bear much fruit apart from me you can do nothing so wisdom does bear fruit wisdom does change people if we remember that wisdom is ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ and the practical things that we learn in the book can only really be done as Paul says through the power of the Holy Spirit so don't think of don't think of this gentleman as a checklist for getting a wife but rather think of what you and your wife can be through the power of the Lord Jesus Christ that something beautiful can be created and as I say it is the beauty of wisdom herself a Thank you.