

One last call to embrace Wisdom

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: 23 January 2022

Preacher: Martyn Thompson

[0 : 00] Good morning. We're going to be reading from the Bible now. You can open up to Proverbs chapter 31. Proverbs 31 verse 10.

An excellent wife who can find. She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good and not harm all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant.

She brings her food from afar. She rises while it's still yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it.

With the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.

[1 : 11] Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She is not afraid of snow for her household. For all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes bed coverings for herself. Her clothing is fine linen and purple.

Her husband is known in the gates where he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them. She delivers sashes to the merchant. Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come.

She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her blessed and her husband also and he praises her. Many women have done excellently but you surpass them all.

[2 : 18] Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain but a woman that fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the gates.

Why do we need wisdom? When you think about it, God's people have actually always needed wisdom. Even in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve still needed wisdom.

They didn't know everything. Even they still needed to listen to God to learn about the world and how they should think and act. And they obviously showed a lack of wisdom.

Even back then. Now, this side of the floor, how much more do we need wisdom? Biblical wisdom. When you look at our church in this time and place, I think there are maybe three groups of people who demonstrate why we still desperately need God's wisdom.

The first group of people I would call reactionaries. Some of you are seeing the world and in the world you're finding things concerning and you're reacting to them.

[3 : 34] And some of the things you're reacting to are concerning. But the way you're reacting to them could be described as an overreaction.

Not Christ-like and more akin to a freak out. Speaking harshly about the topic to others and putting others down who disagree. You might obsess over this one thing and make that one thing the thing. You're getting swept up in a culture of outrage. And sometimes the thing you react against you think is biblical when it's not really. And the reason we can know that is because there's a whole bunch of people who aren't Christians who feel just as strongly about the same thing.

We need wisdom to know how to deal with things in our world and to know when something is actually an issue. The second group of people I would say are asleep.

You too are being swept up in the culture. But instead of freaking out, you're like the frog in the pot of boiling water. Unaware of how much you've become like the world around you.

[4 : 47] You're more likely to think about things from the culture's perspective than God's perspective. We need wisdom to know when we've become more like the world than like Christ.

The final group of people are treading water. You see that you're impacted by the world. You want to be wise. You're turning to God's word for wisdom.

You desperately need him. But when you turn to your Christian brothers and sisters for help, they're either freaking out or they're asleep. We desperately need wisdom.

I don't know about you, but I find myself in a given week, I go through all of those three categories. I overreact to people's overreactions. I go for a few days and then I think back on my days and think, what was I thinking?

How was I living? Well, thankfully today, as we reach our final sermon in Proverbs, wisdom is once again on offer to all of us.

[5 : 49] Now, as we look at Proverbs 31, there are many different approaches. There's been books written about how Proverbs 31 has been looked at over the years. But I think there are two main ways of interpreting it.

The first way, which is probably the most common, is to see it as a description of what a good wife should be like. Puritan Matthew Henry says, this description of the virtuous woman is designed to show what wives the woman should make and what wives the men should choose.

And so people who see it this way will then go through the passage, looking at it and then applying it to their contemporary context, saying this is what a wise woman should be like.

But one thing about this interpretation is often the conclusions that different people have come to over the years are contradictory. It's more just a picture of the gender roles and stereotypes of that particular time.

So in one period of time when people interpret it like this, this passage is about a stay-at-home mum who homeschools her kids. There's nothing wrong with a stay-at-home mum who homeschools their kids.

[7 : 01] But then some people reading it today see an entrepreneurial businesswoman. But there is also a second way to interpret it, and that is to see it as one final portrayal of lady wisdom.

For those of you who were here last week, you might remember how Dave summarised the beginning of Proverbs. He said, at the beginning of Proverbs, we see two women. There's lady wisdom, who's a personification of wisdom, and there's madam folly, who's a personification of foolishness.

And they're both vying for the attention of the reader. Now, in this view, lady wisdom is here one last time, making one last appearance.

She's pushed madam folly away, and here she is. Why do they think it's lady wisdom? Again, here at the end of Proverbs. Look at verse 10.

An excellent wife, who can find. She's far more precious than jewels. She's far more precious than jewels. Now, let's go flipping through Proverbs.

[8 : 10] I want you to go to chapter 3, verse 13. Go to chapter 3, verse 13. 3, verse 13.

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding. For the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. That's talking about wisdom. Let's go to chapter 8, verse 11.

Chapter 8, verse 11. Another portrayal of lady wisdom. For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

The language is quite similar, isn't it? But you might just be thinking, well, that's one similarity.

Maybe it's a common phrase. But the thing is, if you start looking through the rest of the description of Proverbs 31, and then start comparing it to lady wisdom at the beginning of the book, you start to see that they're actually quite alike.

[9 : 27] And we don't have time to look through all of them, but one person summarises the similarities really well by saying, both women are hard to find and are more precious than jewels.

Both have a house and a staff of young women. Both provide food, prosperity, and security. Both are known at the city gates and bestow honour on their companions.

Both are physically strong and loathe wickedness. Both extend their hands to the needy. They laugh and both teach. Their identities and instructions are associated with the fear of the Lord.

End quote. I don't know about you. Feel free to take the first view. But I think that's compelling enough to convince us to see this is one final look at lady wisdom.

But with all that said, if you do look at the two, they do seem a bit different. The Proverbs 31 woman, she just seems more tangible and real life.

[10:33] Why is that? Well, I think it's because this passage is not just a summary of the first nine chapters of Proverbs. It's a summary of all of Proverbs.

It's acting as a conclusion, an epilogue. And so the woman here is not just woman personified, she's woman typified. In this woman, we also see a summary of what wisdom looks like in action for all people.

Men and women. Young and old. Married and single. So, as we get into this passage, on one level, we'll look at it as how good wisdom is.

We'll be thinking, what does this show us about how good wisdom is? Why should we embrace it? And on another level, we'll look at it at the example of wisdom. This fits in really nicely with what Graham Goldsworth, in his book, *Gospel and Wisdom*, says about wisdom.

He says, wisdom is both a gift to be embraced and a task we need to do. It's a gift we need to embrace and a task we need to do. So, in this woman, we see someone we need to embrace, but then in the wisdom she portrays, it's wisdom we need to act out.

[11:53] And one final thing is, this passage is an acrostic. The writer has determined what they're going to write based off the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, not by a logical flow.

And so we're going to look at groupings of things that the passage says about wisdom. So, let's get into the text then. The first thing that should attract us to wisdom is her heart.

Her heart. Look at verse 30. Charm is deceitful. Beauty is vain. But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Out of everything said in this passage, this is the main thing we should praise her for. The basis for everything else she does is her fear of the Lord. And this fear leads to amazing strength. Look at verse 17.

She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. Now, go down to verse 25. Strength and dignity are her clothing.

[12:59] And she laughs at the time to come. In the Old Testament, if you're clothed in something metaphorically, it's showing your true character. And so her true character is that she's strong.

She has dignity. And she's fearless. Because she fears the Lord, she doesn't have to fear the future. She just laughs at it. What a formidable woman.

Now, for us to embrace wisdom means we need the fear of the Lord at the center of our heart. God doesn't work outside in. He works inside out. And remember chapter 1, verse 7.

It's sort of the intro to all of Proverbs. To fear the Lord is to see who God is, what he has done and what he has said, and respond in reverence and faith.

Wanting him to be supreme in all of your life and have your whole life ordered by your relationship with him. And you can see why it's the beginning of knowledge. As soon as you have this posture and mindset, you're on the path to wisdom.

[14:17] If you fear the Lord, you begin to listen to him and obey him. And like Dave said last week, you begin to see that what he says works. He's God.

He created all things. He knows all things. But wisdom is more than just obedience. And this is really important. It's more than just obedience.

It's more than just reading Proverbs and doing it. Biblical wisdom is listening to God and what he says and then using your brain and interpreting what you observe and experience in light of what God has told you.

It's using your brain. It's using your brain. It's using your brain. It's using your brain. It's using your brain. It's using your brain. Interpreting everything in light of what God has told you. At the beginning, John quoted Proverbs 3, I think it was.

In all your ways, acknowledge him. We'll see in the next two points examples of how we can have this mindset of fearing the Lord.

[15:18] But one example of what this looks like in our passage is in our fears. In our fears. There's been a lot of talk of fears recently, hasn't there?

Probably too much talk about fears. It's getting a bit old. But I'm going to talk about it again. During the pandemic, some people have said that the government and Australians have been too fearful of COVID-19.

The response doesn't meet the disease. But then people have then shot back at those people and said, you're too fearful of vaccines and the government.

Who's right? Who's wrong? I think we can say everyone has been expressing their fears in one way or another. But the fear of the Lord in our heart can help us deal with our fears.

I think one of the main reasons wisdom isn't afraid of the future in verse 25 is because she fears the Lord. If you're finding yourself fearful of something, you can go to God and meditate on who he is and what he's done.

[16:26] And just doing that begins to stoke a fear or reverence of God, which can minimize your other fears. This situation is out of control.

It's out of my control. But God is in control. These people might think bad of me, but I have God's approval in Christ. We don't have enough money.

God will provide. God will provide. The fear of the Lord minimizes those other fears. Another reason she isn't fearful is because she's once again used her brain and prepared for future hardship.

Look at verse 21. She's not afraid of snow for her household for all her household are clothed in scarlet. There are some things which we should actually have a healthy fear about, but she's prepared.

And this goes together with the fear of the Lord. You're fearful of something, but you remember that ultimately with God, you have nothing to fear. But that doesn't stop you using your God-given brain to think of ways to minimize the risk of the thing you fear.

[17:36] But you make these plans in the context of that greater ultimate fear of the Lord. Now, if you aren't fearing the Lord, this is not how you're going to react to fear.

You might just give in to it and overreact. Or you'll put your mind to work trying to sort it out. You'll try really hard to solve the problem without that bigger perspective of the fear of the Lord, of who God is.

Do you fear the things of the world or do you fear the Lord? Is this how you think about life? Interpreting everything in reference to who he is and what he has said.

Do you have wisdom's heart? Wisdom's heart is pretty beautiful, but the next thing we see about her is her relationships. Look at verses 11 and 12.

Remember, this is supposed to be an appeal for us to embrace wisdom.

[18:47] No lack, only good. That's pretty appealing. But it gets better when you look at verse 23. Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.

It seems like her husband is in a place of honour simply because he is her husband. I think a lot of us could relate to that. But her relationship is not only positive with her husband, it's positive with her household.

Verse 15. She rises while it's yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maiden. Then go down to verse 27. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

She works hard to look after her kids and her servants. Now, plenty of people will only care about their families, but not others.

But that's not the case for wisdom. Look at verse 20. She opens her hands to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. She's willing to look out for those who are vulnerable, who are rejected.

[19:59] And she doesn't just serve people physically. She serves them spiritually. Look at verse 26. She opens her mouth with wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

No wonder in verses 28 and 29, it says, Her children rise up and call her blessed. Her husband also. And he praises her.

Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all. Once again, we're just stunned and attracted to this wonderful woman as we look at how she relates to others.

And as we embrace wisdom, it too should impact our relationship with others. Relationships can be hard. Have you found that?

I think I've gotten better at interacting with the others over the years, but often I'll find myself going into a situation where I want to work extra hard to get along with someone really well.

[20:56] And then I fail abysmally. Relationships are hard. So how does wisdom help us in our relationships? Remember, the basis for everything this woman does is her fear of the Lord.

And when you have a posture of fearing the Lord, you want to see people the way God sees people. And you want to treat people the way God tells you to treat people.

There's a lot in the Bible that could be said about how we should see people and how we should treat people. But one thing, just from the very beginning in Genesis, is that we should see people as

the image of God.

We should see them as the image of God, which, among other things, means that every human is a representative of God in the world. In our sin, that image has been tarnished, but it's still there. Now, if you mistreat a representative of a country, you slight the whole country. There's a lot of Serbians annoyed at our country right now just because of one person.

[22 : 02] And it's the same with God's image bearers. When we do wrong to others, we're really doing wrong to God. And when we treat others well because they're God's image bearers, we're really doing good to God.

Is that what's going on in your mind when you interact with others, with your family, with your work colleagues, with the checkout chick, the guy at the petrol station?

This is God's representative. This person is made in the image of God. But wisdom in relationships is more than just seeing people rightly.

It's doing right to them. Like this woman, doing good and not harm. And this requires us to know what God says about how we should treat people, especially in a world which calls good, bad, and bad good.

But remember, wisdom is more than just obedience. It's taking what God says and using our God-given brain and thinking about how to apply it in a situation.

[23 : 06] That's what most of the Proverbs are from chapter 10 to 30. They're just reflections on the world in light of what God says. And we see this wife doing it in this passage.

Look at verse 27. She looks well to the way of her household. She looks. She thinks about it. She plans. And then puts those plans into action to do good of those around us.

And that's not always easy. Wisdom's not always easy. The Bible tells us to love others. The Bible tells us to do good to others, to have compassion. But what that can look like in a given situation, that's not always easy, is it?

It's not always simple. It can be hard to figure out. So we've seen wisdom's heart. And at that heart is the fear of the Lord. And we've seen how it flows out to impact her relationships.

Now let's see how it impacts wisdom's work. Look at verses 13 and 14. She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.

[24 : 11] She is like the ships of the merchant and brings her food from afar. She has practical skills and is resourceful. Verse 16.

She considers a field and buys it. With the fruit of her hand, she plants a vineyard. Verse 18. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.

She's business savvy. Making profit from wise investments. And then reinvest those profits to make more profits. Verse 19. She puts her hand to the distaff and holds her hand to the spindle.

22. She makes bed coverings for herself. Her clothing is fine linen and purple. Verse 24. She makes linen garments and sells them.

She delivers sashes to the merchants. A linen garment could be worth around three months' wages. She uses her practical skills to make things that are both beautiful and expensive.

[25 : 17] I don't know if you've heard the term before. It's relatively new. But I think we could describe this woman as a girl boss. She works hard. She's smart.

She's strong. She's successful. She's profitable. Now, imagine for a second, you're a teenage shepherd boy in ancient Israel. And in a lot of ways, that's like the target audience of this book. You're a teenage boy in Israel. What do you think he would think about this description? I think he would be impressed. To quote Dave Blunt, I think it'd be a, he'd say, oof.

So how does wisdom then impact the way we work? She's amazing. How does she impact our work? Well, first, it helps us see it as something good. This passage is obviously commending work, working with your hands, up to investing your money in your work.

And in the rest of the Bible, God says work is good. Now, Australians don't agree. I found research from a company called Hayes. They put out a report in June of last year, and they found 49% of people aren't satisfied with their jobs.

[26 : 33] And there's probably a lot of good reasons for that. People don't like their work. But God created us to work. Back at the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, 28, God says to Adam and Eve, be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

This passage is often called the creation mandate. The creation mandate. And I really like what Barry Cooper says on his podcast, Simply Put.

It's a great podcast where he explains biblical concepts simply, like eight minutes. He says, Work is good.

You can serve God and honour God as an engineer. You can honour God working at Officeworks.

You can honour God as a lawyer. You can honour God as a vet.

You can honour God as a builder. You can honour God working at Maccas. You don't need to be a pastor. And these things don't only become honourable if you've managed to use them as a means for evangelism.

[28 : 02] Now, don't get me wrong. Evangelism is good. And evangelism in your work is great. But work can be good just because it's done for God.

It's good because it's what we're made for. It's good because through it we show ourselves to be made in the image of God. Creating things. Making order out of chaos. And wisdom doesn't just help us see work as good.

It helps us go about our work. Think about how this woman works. In verse 13, she works with a willing hand. Because she's working for the Lord, she works hard and happily.

I don't think it's just because she likes sewing. Verse 16 and 18, she works shrewdly and efficiently, wanting to be profitable. And connected to our last point, she wants to use her work to do good to others.

She's taken what God says and used her God-given brain to think about how it applies to her work. Have you ever stopped and thought about how your faith should change the way you work?

[29 : 11] Not just with how you interact with your peers, not swearing or gossiping, but how you actually do your job. How you pack shelves or draw up plans or whatever the random things you do.

Have you thought about how God impacts the way I do this? And it's not always simple. Tim Keller has a really good book on work called Every Good Endeavor.

And in that book, he encourages Christians to get together with Christians of the same profession and chat through what it looks like to live out their faith in that job. Imagine if all the engineers in our church, and there's many of them, got together and just chatted about how God's word changed the way they work as engineers.

Imagine if all the other, the different groups of professions did that. Doctors, they're smart. And so they've been doing it for years. Catherine Hollier, she heads up the Christian, the Newcastle branch of the Christian Medical Dental Fellowship of Australia.

And pretty much what they do is they meet up multiple times a year. And they just talk about how they can work out their faith in their profession. But you don't need to organize something formal.

[30 : 29] Grab a Christian who works in a similar field after church and just chat through how you can integrate your faith and your work. Maybe you would like to organize something more formal.

That's up to you. So we've seen this final look at wisdom in Proverbs. And isn't she beautiful?

Isn't she intimidating if we were to be her? We've seen her heart, her relationships, and her work.

We've seen that biblical wisdom is not just for Sundays, but it's for every aspect of our life.

The fear of the Lord goes into every aspect of how we live. Verse 31 correctly says, Give her the fruit of her hands and let her works praise her in the gates.

We really should embrace wisdom. But we can't stop you. Why can't we stop you? Because when Jesus talked about the Old Testament, he taught that it's all about him.

[31 : 36] In John 5, when he was speaking to the Pharisees, he said, You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life, but it is they that bear witness to me. The whole of the Old Testament, including Proverbs, bears witness to Jesus.

How does this passage point us to Jesus? Well, in Proverbs, we've seen wisdom personified as lady wisdom.

In Proverbs 31, we've also seen wisdom typified. But Jesus is wisdom incarnate. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul says, Christ is the wisdom of God.

Christ is the wisdom of God. What's more tangible than that? God come as a man, the ultimate wise man, in the flesh.

He is the true and better Proverbs 31 woman. Now, we don't fear the Lord. We aren't wise. I'm not wise.

[32 : 42] We find him charming and beautiful, and we happily embrace the world's view of things. We overreact or we're just asleep. Our hearts, relationships, and work don't reflect someone who's embraced wisdom.

And because of this, we rightly deserve to fear the Lord, but not in awe, but in terror. But Jesus didn't just do good to his bride all the days of his life.

He did good to his bride, the church, by loving her and giving up his life for her. This lady provided for her family by giving them wisdom and clothing and food.

Jesus is wisdom, and he gives the ultimate provision. He clothes us in his righteousness and lets us feed on himself. Because of Jesus taking the punishment for his people's sin on the cross and giving them his righteousness, God can see us as if we live the perfect wise life of Christ.

Because of Jesus, we can come to God in reverent fear. And because of Jesus, we actually can be wise. Many people here in this church, you are wise.

[34 : 03] He gives us the spirit of wisdom. But Jesus is also the final and fullest revelation of God by which we can interpret the world. Colossians 1 says this, talking about Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created. All things were created through him and for him.

All things were created for him. How's that for a framework to view the world? In Ephesians 5, when Paul kicks off his section talking about how Christians should relate to one another and work, he starts that section off by saying, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

And the translators are a bit chicken there. It really should say, submit to one another out of fear of Christ. For Paul, the fear of Christ is the starting point for our relationships and our work.

Now, some people here might openly admit that you're not a Christian. You might say you don't believe in Christ because your wisdom and intellect makes you think that he's not worth believing in.

[35 : 26] Or maybe you're someone who just hasn't made up your mind. Here's the thing, without Christ, things are never really going to make sense. Because of the mind God has given you, you can make some sense of the world.

But if you're missing Christ, you're missing the most important piece of the puzzle. Instead, actually, it's more like you're just looking at one piece of the puzzle and you're missing the rest of it. It's like you're looking at the world through a hole in the wall.

That's your view of the world. Without him, your heart, your relationships, your work, your life will always be missing something. Remember, all things were through him, for him.

But Christ, the wisdom of God, caused you to embrace him. It's on offer to you. Or maybe you're someone who has been overreacting or just asleep.

And maybe you've realised you've never truly been wise. You've just been flowing with the world. You've never truly embraced Christ, the wisdom of God.

[36 : 34] Well, Christ, the wisdom of God, calls you today to embrace him. Wisdom is on offer for you. Now, for those of you who have embraced Christ, the wisdom of God, the life of wisdom never stops.

Abraham Kuyper famously said, There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine.

As you continue to embrace Christ in reverence and faith, that will overflow in the depths of your heart into Christ-like, wise relationships and work.

Christ, the wisdom of God, calls to you and says, Keep embracing me. Because that is what the life of wisdom is. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Lord, Father, we ask your forgiveness for how often we aren't wise.

[37 : 40] We don't look to you. We don't fear you. We don't acknowledge you in all our ways. But, Lord, we're thankful for Christ, the wisdom of God, that you freely offer to him, to us, so that we can be wise.

Help us embrace him, not just on Sunday, not just at small group. But in every aspect of our life, Lord. We're thankful for him.

We pray all this in his name. Amen.