

“Dealing with Ideals”
Proverbs 31:10-31

Ben Johnston-Krase
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¹⁰A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
¹²She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
¹³She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
¹⁴She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
¹⁵She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
¹⁶She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
¹⁷She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
¹⁸She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
¹⁹She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
²⁰She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
²¹She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
²²She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
²³Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
²⁴She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
²⁵Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
²⁶She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
²⁷She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
²⁸Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
²⁹“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”
³⁰Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
³¹Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

I'd like to begin this morning with a full disclosure. There are parts of the Bible I don't want my daughter to see. Not yet. The Bible's a great book—don't get me wrong. In fact, we have a children's Bible at home that Sylvia and I cruise through now and then, and she's beginning to grow fond of her favorite stories and characters. But there are parts of the Bible that, well, I'm not sure she's ready for—not at age 5. And not at age 6. And not at age... 14? 15?

This is one of those parts. Proverbs 31. "A capable wife who can find?" Sylvia is already enjoying the pretend play of marriage. At the ripe old age of 3, she declared to Karla and me that she was going to marry her friend Ike. And then, when we moved to Wisconsin, she stuck to that script until she met her friend Neva at school. Now perhaps Neva is the front-runner, and Ike has been demoted to groomsman. Her other friend at school, Booker, has expressed some interest in marrying Sylvia, but we'll see, she says.

And just to clarify, Karla and I *never* bring this up. We're not the kind of parents who would ask our child, "Who are you going to marry when you grow up?" just because it's cute. If anything, we've downplayed this marriage talk. No sense in rushing things, we think. But you see, Sylvia has been a flower girl in several weddings, and we've seen the look she gets in her eye when the bride walks in with that long, flowing, white gown. She's absolutely mesmerized!

Back to Proverbs 31. What I'm concerned about is that my daughter, with marriage stars in her eyes, might, at the age of 8 or 10 or 12, flip her Bible open to Proverbs 31 and get some ideas. "A capable wife who can find?" That's how this passage starts out, but as you read through these twenty-two verses, the question that comes to mind is, "A *perfect* wife who can find?"

Let me go through the passage again and this time I'll just summarize:

She is far more precious than jewels.

Her husband will have no lack of gain because of her.

She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

She works with willing hands.

Like a merchant ship she brings her food from far away.

Rising while it is still night, she provides food for her family.

She surveys a field, buys it, and then farms it. And she has strong arms!

Verse 18 says, Her lamp does not go out at night.

She can sew, and makes clothes for her entire household. Plus she makes clothes to sell to support the family.

"She does not eat the bread of idleness."

When she speaks, she speaks wisdom and kindness.

Her children and her husband call her "happy." In fact, her husband says, "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

The passage says just one thing about her husband:

"Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land."

Well, how nice for him! She seems to be doing most of the work to keep the family running, and he's well known in the city gates. Sort of makes us wonder if Proverbs 31 wasn't written by a husband—a husband who liked the idea of a wife who worked constantly, never slept, and kept the homestead running like a top so that he'd have time to hang around the city gates hobnobbing with other well-known husbands!

Proverbs was actually written by men about 2600 years ago. And these men were the sages—true intellectuals of their day. They were teachers and counselors and bureaucrats. I've long thought that this section of Proverbs might be a little more interesting if the sages' wives added another chapter: "A capable husband who can find?" But instead what we have here is a fairly vivid description of idealized womanhood—or, at least, the way womanhood might have been idealized 600 years before Christ.

Now let me get back to my original statement: I'm not so sure I want Sylvia to read Proverbs 31. Not yet. And here's why: as her dad, I'm perhaps hyper-sensitive to our own culture's ways of idealizing womanhood.

Let me give you some examples. These are just some statistics and they give some shape to what I'm talking about here...

- Research indicates that 90% of women in our culture are dissatisfied with their appearance in some way.
- In 1970 the average age of a girl who started dieting was 14; by 1990 the average dieting age fell to 8.
- Two out of five women would trade three to five years of their life to achieve their weight goals.
- Young girls are more afraid of becoming fat than they are of nuclear war, cancer, or losing their parents.
- One out of three women and one out of four men are on a diet at any given time. Two thirds of dieters regain the weight within one year and virtually all regain it within five years.
- Meanwhile, the diet industry (diet foods, diet programs, diet drugs, etc.) takes in over \$40 billion each year and continues to grow.

These last three are truly shocking:

- In 2003, 35 per cent of girls 6 to 12 years old have been on at least one diet.
- 50 to 70 per cent of normal weight girls believe they are overweight.

- 24 million Americans have an eating disorder and roughly 90 percent of them are women and girls between the ages of 12 and 25.

So, once again, as a daddy, I'm perhaps hyper-sensitive to our own culture's ways of idealizing womanhood. I know that my daughter—and our daughters and sons—are growing up in a world where they are bombarded daily with messages and images of idealized beauty. The belief that being thin and beautiful is a prerequisite for being happy oozes from the very pores of our society. It's everywhere.

With that in mind, I'm even hyper-sensitive to ways that womanhood may have been idealized in biblical times, which brings us back once again to Proverbs and the question, "When and how would I be comfortable sharing this passage with my daughter?"

It's a fair question. Up to this point in the sermon, I've been pretty dismissive of Proverbs 31. It might seem like I'd like to edit it right out of the Bible. But here's the truth: I'll gladly share Proverbs 31 with Sylvia when she's old enough to distinguish between a biblically historic ideal of "the capable wife" and a God-given, grace-filled sense of reality—a reality which says to all of us that we *need not be bound to unrealistic images and idealizations of ourselves*—a reality that reminds us that we have worth, not because we're perfect, but simply because we're worthy.

A good friend of ours recently dropped her son, Lucas, off at preschool and overheard this conversation. A little boy in the class approached Lucas and bragged proudly, "My father is a fireman and my uncle is a policeman."

Her son fired right back, "My brother is napping and my father is washing dishes."

Isn't that great? In a way, that's what I'm talking about here. "My father is washing dishes" as a schoolyard taunt. And suddenly the idealization of "manhood" melts into the daily reality of good men and good fathers.

And I'll cheer for those things in our culture that will help our children build sound, realistic views of themselves. *Images and understandings* that will break the stereotypes of idealized womanhood and manhood and help our children grow more comfortably into the lives God has given them.

A few years ago, I wrote a song called, "Whoever We Are." And in some ways, it's a response to the ways we've idealized ourselves. We all hold images in front of us—images of the perfect man, the perfect woman, the perfect student, the perfect Christian. And those idealizations often get the best of us. We're rushing around, from work, to home, to soccer practice, back home, to bed by 11, and up the next day to do some version of it all over again. Along the way we often berate ourselves for not living up to the unrealistic expectations we've placed on our lives.

Along the way, we need to be mindful of the fact that God isn't waiting for any of us to be perfect.

Whatever is good, whatever is true, whatever it is that honors you

Whoever we are, wherever we go, whatever we do we want our lives to show

Father of love, Mother of grace
Spirit of truth we're found in your embrace
God of all things, God of this hour
God of our lives we worship you
Whoever we are