

women IN SCRIPTure

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The Proverbs 31 Virtuous Woman

by *Stephanie Catmull*

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“

A woman who Fears the Lord shall be praised. A woman who loves God, is in awe of God, has reverence for God, who respects and obeys God, who wants to know more about God.

Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands. She is like the merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants. She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms. She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor; yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes a tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies sashes for the merchants; Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he raises her: many daughters have done well, but you excel them all.” Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her won works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31: 10-31)

Reading through this the first time, don't you feel condemned, convicted, unworthy? Don't you feel as if you have fallen short – extremely short – of what God expects from a wife and mother? At first glance, it appears as the ultimate laundry “To Do” list hanging on your refrigerator, with near impossible expectations for any woman to live up to. Get up before the sun every morning, work until your hands bleed, sew, cook, be everything and everyone to your husband, your kids, your community. Be selfless and always giving to those around you. Make extra money to support your household. Travel hundreds of miles to get the choicest groceries and linens for your house. Humbly serve your husband always, and praise & honor him in front of everyone. Always dress well and have your makeup on. That “What About Me” attitude just isn't going to cut it.

And are you telling yourself, “Ok, time to roll my sleeves up and get to work,” because it's the work that proves how virtuous I am. It's the work that you feel you should be living up to, especially if you want to be the perfect wife to your husband. Or the perfect mother to your children. Or the perfect giving woman of your community. Or the perfect woman to impress God. On the flipside, the lack of work tells me how worthless, lazy, and unacceptable I am. How I absolutely have fallen short of the glory of God. How I must have little or no faith, because I

am not the woman God wants me to be.

And so you do the work. You do the list, or try anyway. And day by day, you start to mess up. And when you do (trust me, you will), you have that accusing finger pointed right at you – that laughing, scolding, condemning finger that says if you truly were a Godly woman, you should be able to do all of this with no problem.

And so you must not be a Godly woman.

And so you try again. You pull yourself up by your bootstraps, shake off the ruined day, and start again with the next sunrise. But it doesn't last long, does it? You try to get a job, but then that means you can't put a home-cooked dinner on the table every night. You certainly don't have time to sew. You try to get up early and have all the clothes lain out, but then the baby is crying and you're lucky if you can even put your own slippers on. You find it hard to praise your husband at the gates, especially trying to find anything positive about him right now. You feel that something must be terribly wrong with you, and the guilt sets in. You need to be at least 10 women to adequately complete this list. Who does God think you are anyways, a miracle-worker or an octopus?

But let me ask you this: why are you focusing on your works?? Is it because you feel you should, because you feel this is what the Proverb is saying? When you do good, then you *are* good? That then, God will be happy with you? That your husband will finally be pleased with who he married?

Then you have completely missed the point of Proverbs 31. You have completely missed the point of God's grace. You have completely missed the point of fearing our Lord. You have missed what Jesus has done for you. And you have completely missed the point of works taking *place of* your faith, rather than works as a *natural extension* of your faith.

Let's look at who wrote this Proverb in the first place. It is widely believed that the book of Proverbs were written by King Solomon, David's son. Remember that when he was crowned king, his first prayer to God was for WISDOM, not riches or power. God was so pleased with this request, that He granted Solomon unequalled wisdom – God's wisdom – during his reign. These proverbs are God's wisdom flowing through Solomon's pen of experience. It is God's Spirit whispering His Word through the hand of His wisest king. And this proverb supposedly came from Solomon's mom – Bathsheba – describing in detail the qualities of a wife that she wanted her son to have. Is Solomon King Lemuel in the Proverb? Probably. But even if he isn't, it God is ascribing the perfect qualities of what a woman should be.

A helper and partner to her spouse. A patient, hard-working mother to her children. A giving, indispensable woman to her community. A creative income-earner for her family. An unparalleled cook. An impeccably dressed, beautiful

woman. A selfless, tireless lady who gets up before dawn so that all of her family's needs are taken care of before her own. A woman who proactively prepares for disaster, so that in case of misfortune, her family can withstand the slings and arrows of life's circumstances. The constant encourager, respectful of her husband, always building up his reputation aside from her own.

Is there anything wrong with trying to live up to this? Certainly not. Is there anything wrong with aspiring to be the best you can be? Absolutely not. But if you start identifying yourself with you *what* do, rather than *who* you are in Christ, then you are reaching for a perfection that you will never attain.

See, the Israelites tried to do this. They had numerous rules and regulations they had to live up to, ones that God commanded (read Leviticus if you want a taste of it). Why so many rules? First, God loves us, and wants to prevent heartache, destruction, and unhappiness in our lives that will only serve to separate us from Him. Don't commit adultery, because there is nothing but heartache, pain, disease, complications, and relationship-ruin on the other side of it. Don't be jealous of what everyone else has, because you not only miss the blessing God has in store just for you, but you will make yourself and everyone else around you unhappy by wanting something that is not meant for you. Don't strive for the empty, worthless things of this world, and make them more important than God by putting them on its own pedestal.

Second, and more importantly, God wants you to understand – UNDERSTAND – that constant works are impossible to achieve His righteousness. That you will never be perfect on your own. That you will never be able to do everything right without His help and without His saving grace. Your relationship with God is not based on what you do and do and do. Why do you think the Israelites threw up their hands when they simply couldn't do it? You are no different than them, because they, too, would go through the vicious cycle of trying, messing up, trying again, messing up again etc etc. Feeling bad, repenting, asking for forgiveness, then starting all over. It's exhausting, isn't it?

And finally, once you've experienced that your works can't save you, that you will never be perfect no matter how much you try and fail...now you are ready to experience the need for a Saviour, the need for Jesus as your Redeemer, the need for Jesus as your Perfector, your righteousness through His atonement for you.

Are the rules God sets out are His Gold Standard? Yes. Are they going to save you? No. But here's the thing: You Will Want to Do These Things When You Have God in Your Heart. When you have the Spirit of God in you, it is not a burden, but a joy. When you have God's love in you, you WANT to please your family. You WANT to be the best wife you can be. Not because you *have* to,

because you WANT to. Because by loving God, you show His love to those around you. You do these things not to persuade God that you are a good person; you do these things because God's love is flowing through you, and you are His love in action. You are His shining light, His Love apart from works, and His love amidst your works.

And so here you go again, condemning yourself because you are not all these things, and therefore are a substandard example of God. You are not the Gold Standard; rather, you are the aluminum foil example. You must not love God like you should, because if you did, you would be all these things and more. And you're not, so God must not love you, and you must not love God.

Stop right here, and recognize the lie you are living under. Understand love, as God sees it, is not an earthly emotion, the romanticized version of love you see on TV. It's not the books on the self-help shelf in the bookstore about loving yourself. Love for God is a reverent FEAR of God.

But your definition of Fear is not the same definition of fear that the Bible uses. Here's what most people think of when they consider fear: "an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat." And so you equate God with an unpleasant emotion. You consider God as a danger, or a threat, someone who is about to cause you great pain if you don't obey. And here's where people get stuck. Because they equate fear with being scared, and why would you want to love someone out of fear of them? Would you love an abusive husband with your whole heart, or is it more because if you don't, you will be beaten? That isn't true love if you are scared of them; you are "loving" them because if you didn't, they would pound you into the pavement.

You don't want to love God *because* you are scared of Him. Many people don't want to come to God because they are resistant to loving a judging, scary God out of pure obligation. They don't want to feel like they *have* to come to have a relationship with God out of fear of the alternative: hell. What kind of choice is that? And what kind of God would put a person in hell anyway, simply because they don't believe Jesus is His son? Fear is the crutch that many people hang their refusal to worship God on. They obstinately refuse to love God because they equate love of God with an unholy horror. They stubbornly rebel against the idea of a judgmental God, and don't want any part of it.

But what you don't get, is that your conclusion is based on a faulty premise. The fear God is talking about, and that the Bible talks about is not a scary, terrifying fear you *think* it's talking about.

Fear that the Bible talks about in this sense is Reverential Awe, Wonderment,

Respect, Love, Submission, Recognition, Deference, and everlasting Gratitude, Worship, and Thankfulness.

We don't recognize this "fear", because it doesn't exist in this day and age. We don't fear our president. We don't fear politicians. We don't fear religious leaders. We don't fear teachers. We don't fear our parents. We don't fear Truth. And we don't fear the Word. Most people don't fear God. Understand the correct premise in the beginning, and the conclusion will naturally follow. Rearrange your faulty definition of fear to align with God's dictionary, and His Truth will speak to you.

Now you're ready to read God's purpose with His understanding. The key verse in Proverbs 31 is this found in verse 30: "Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who **FEARS** the Lord, she shall be praised."

A woman who Fears the Lord shall be praised. A woman who loves God, is in awe of God, has reverence for God, who respects and obeys God, who wants to know more about God. A woman who wonders at God's creation. A woman who respects all of Who God is. A woman who puts God first in everything. A woman who wants His wisdom, His knowledge, His Truth, His Love, His Saving Grace, His Everything. A woman who is IN LOVE with God. A woman who knows that God is the Be All and End All, the Alpha and Omega, the Master and Creator. A woman who lives for and strives to please God. A woman who worships God. A woman who is the example of God in her home. A woman who knows God has her in the palm of His hand.

A woman who Fears the Lord is a woman to be praised.

Now, are you changing your mind about what fear is? And what God expects from you? Do you see that it is not by your works that God loves you, and doesn't praise you for them. He loves you, period. And when you return that love, when you fear Him, you will evidence your love in words and in your actions.

Fear God, **Act** on your love for Him, and He will praise you.

You know how Jesus in the Gospel of Mark talks about how you will know the followers of Jesus, by the works that they do and the miracles they perform?

"And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents, and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:17-18)

The glory of God is shown through their actions, as evidence of their faith. The disciples didn't do these things first to *prove* their love for God, or to show what they *should be doing* if they love and have faith in God. They are not trying (unsuccessfully) to do these things so that God will love them. Their works are a *result* of their love, fear, and faith in God.

James, Jesus' brother states it very clearly, in his book: "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith **BY** my works....that faith without works is dead...for as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." (James 2: 18-26)

But don't put the cart before the horse. First comes being saved, and THEN comes the proof of your faith.

Paul in Romans is very clear on this, too, because your works will not SAVE you..."that a man is justified by faith *apart* from the deeds of the law...for if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God...now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt." (Romans 3:27 – 4:4)

You may be trying to be that Proverbs 31 woman, doing the laundry list of works, before first believing and having faith in Almighty God. You have put the cart before the horse. Before understanding that in Jesus is your righteousness. That in Jesus you are pure, holy, and perfect to God. If you haven't committed yourself to Him, Love Him, Fear Him, Believe in Him, Obey His commands, then your works are nothing more than filthy rags, and that's why you feel condemned, unworthy, and a failure. You have put your identity in works and not in God.

You know where you need to start. Look to God first, and you will *become* that Virtuous Woman in His eyes and in your husband's eyes and in your children's eyes. Not by your works, but through your righteousness in God's Redeeming Son. Don't examine yourself. Examine your relationship with God, and see where it's lacking. Improve upon *that*, and you will improve upon you. The works will follow.

God Bless.