

January 24, 2010

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

The Ideal Wife

Proverbs 31:10-31

Pastor Tom Anderson

Let me begin with a word of congratulations to the 23 new members we receive this morning. Some of you have been active here for a long time, but many of you are brand new to our fellowship. Either way, we welcome you! Membership is a great spiritual milestone. It means commitment to Christ, to his mission, his people and to living a life of love. Commitment releases potential in us. Committed behavior always outperforms uncommitted behavior. That is true in marriage. That is true in education, in sports, in finance, and most especially in following Jesus Christ. We form a more perfect union with you this morning and renew our own commitment to grow as a compassionate community of Christian witness in Houghton Lake.

Actress Halle Berry said this:

Let me tell you something, being thought of as "a beautiful woman" has spared me nothing in life, no heartache, no trouble. Love has been difficult. Beauty is essentially meaningless, and it is always transitory. I can't believe what people do to themselves [to make themselves look beautiful], the excess, and then they end up distorted. Worse, they still have that hole in their soul that led them to change themselves to begin with.

There you have it, right from the experience of someone rated by *People* magazine as one of the most beautiful women in the world: a confirmation of the Word of God that "... beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." (Proverbs 31:31)

Proverbs 31:10-31 is the description of the ideal wife. The passage says nothing about her height, weight, measurements, hair color, eye color, skin color, favorite cosmetics, fashion choices or jewelry. Instead of these superficialities, we get a description of her soul—her character. Indeed, we begin with that word: "A wife of noble *character*..." Character is destiny. Character is your moral substance as a person. Who you are on the inside will determine almost everything that happens to you in life.

Like Psalm 112, which we considered last week, this poem is an acrostic. It consists of 22 lines in Hebrew, each line beginning with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet from aleph (the first) to taw (the last). This explains the uneven flow of ideas in the poem

because the author is following the alphabet. This morning we will rearrange the verses into two categories: the character of the ideal wife and her works.

Her character begins with her faith. "... a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised." (Proverbs 31:30) This idea began the book of Proverbs. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." (Proverbs 1:7) Its appearance at the beginning and the end of the book serves to highlight faith as the bottom line of wise living. Marriages and family relationships that are based on faith are significantly more healthy and enduring than those that are not. Among those couples who do three practices together—weekly worship, daily prayer, and regular Bible reading—the divorce rate is virtually zero. If you are not a practicing Christian, if you have not committed your life to Christ, you would do well to reconsider, if for nothing else the obvious health and family benefits. Beauty, truth and goodness go together. Real beauty comes from the truth and goodness of faith in Christ.

Which brings me to goodness: Proverbs 31:12 says, "She brings [her husband] good, not harm all the days of her life." What does this mean? I once heard it said that there are no meaningless moments in a marriage. Literally every thought and word and act—however small or trivial—does one of two things: either it serves to build up the relationship, or it serves to tear it down. There are no small things in human relationships. In fact, the small things are the big things. The wise woman knows and pays attention to every word and deed. Does it build the partnership or enlarge the gap? Does it blame, nag and accuse, or does it encourage, seek solutions and move the relationship forward?

Proverbs 31:25 says, "She is clothed with strength and dignity..." Again, this is not about external fashions but the character that clothes her soul. This woman is not an appendage of her husband or her family. She has a dignity and strength all her own which she brings into her marriage and relationships. Years ago at a county fair there was a work horse competition. At the end an experiment was performed where the winning horse was teamed up with the runner-up. Combining their strengths these two horses were able to pull a weight four times more that either of them could pull alone. That is synergy. A wise woman knows her strengths and believes in her dignity. She then combines these strengths with her husband and the two become more than they could be on their own.

A final character trait is generosity. Proverbs 31:20 says, “She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.” The godly woman does not live for herself. She sees the needs of those around her and opens her heart. Mary Beth Brady is one of the most beautiful women in our county. She is a hospice chaplain and a devout Christian who has given her life to care for the needs of the chronically sick and the terminally ill. Her “congregation” is several hundred people scattered over a three county area. It all began years ago when she saw a need and opened her heart to fill it. Not all of us are called to do great things, but all of us can do small things—generous things—with great love.

From the character of the godly woman, we shift to her works. James 2:18 says, “...I will show you my faith by what I do.” The godly woman speaks with her life. Here, Proverbs 31 provides a catalog of household tasks and business endeavors: selecting wool and flax, providing food, real estate transactions, running a vineyard, negotiating sales, spinning yarn, making clothes, selling to merchants. It is pretty clear from this list that the godly woman does not recognize any gender barriers to her pursuits. She participates freely in mothering, agriculture, real estate, finance, manufacturing and sales.

But this catalog of activity is not what sets her apart; it is her work ethic. She works with eager hands (Proverbs 31:13); she gets up while it is still dark (Proverbs 31:15); she sets about her work vigorously (Proverbs 31:17); She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness (Proverbs 31:27). The godly woman may not be rich, but the wealth of her faith shows in her energetic engagement to provide for her family and for the needy. John Wesley once preached a sermon about the Christian use of money in which he made three points about what the Bible teaches: 1) Earn all you can by honest means; 2) Save all you can, avoiding waste and extravagance; and 3) Give all you can to help others. The godly woman of Proverbs 31 embodies this stewardship of her time, talents or treasure.

The great reward of the godly woman is not the fame and applause of *People* magazine or the media. It is the praise of her family. Proverbs 31:28 says, “Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her...” When the godly woman gets off work and comes home, before getting out of her car she says to herself,

“I am now beginning the greatest work of my life: to bless my children and my family.”
To succeed in this work is the real treasure and wealth of the godly woman.

In Jewish tradition, this scripture was read every Sabbath day at the dinner table by the children and the husband. You might like to try this today. If you have a godly woman in your life, call her or talk to her today and say these words to her, “I have risen up to call you blessed.” (Proverbs 31:28. paraphrased)