

A GOOD WOMAN: Tribute to a Christian mother

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Proverbs 31 v 10 - 31 Message

"A good woman is hard to find, and worth far more than diamonds. Her husband trusts her without reserve, and never has reason to regret it. Never spiteful, she treats him generously all her life long. She shops around for the best yarns and cottons, and enjoys knitting and sewing. She's like a trading ship that sails to faraway places and brings back exotic surprises. She's up before dawn, preparing breakfast for her family and organizing her day. She looks over a field and buys it, then, with money she's put aside, plants a garden. First thing in the morning, she dresses for work, rolls up her sleeves, eager to get started. She senses the worth of her work, is in no hurry to call it quits for the day. She's skilled in the crafts of home and hearth, diligent in homemaking. She's quick to assist anyone in need, reaches out to help the poor. She doesn't worry about her family when it snows; their winter clothes are all mended and ready to wear. She makes her own clothing, and dresses in colourful linens and silks. Her husband is greatly respected when he deliberates with the city fathers. She designs gowns and sells them, brings the sweaters she knits to the dress shops. Her clothes are well made and elegant, and she always faces tomorrow with a smile. When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly. She keeps an eye on everyone in her household, and keeps them all busy and productive. Her children respect and bless her; her husband joins in with words of praise: "Many women have done wonderful things, but you've outclassed them all!" Charm can mislead and beauty soon fades. The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-GOD. Give her everything she deserves! Festoon her life with praises!"

The Hebrew word that is pronounced *pawnee*, which is generally translated as 'jewels', or a specific gem according to the context or translation, is found only 6 times in the Old Testament. *Job 28.18* says that wisdom is of more value than *jewels*, as do *Proverbs 3:15* and *8.11* and, in chapter 20 verse 15, speaking knowledgably is referred as being more precious than *jewels* and in *Lamentations 4.7* the word is used to describe *glowing health*. Clearly the word is meant to denote something priceless and the only other place that it is used is in *Proverbs 31.10* where it describes a good woman and says that she is worth more than jewels.

That verse and those following are a description of a good woman that is part of some very strong advice that King Lemuel's mother gave him. On reading the passage again recently my first thought was that it is a list of virtues more descriptive of an angel than of a woman who was a wife and mother. Then I thought again and tried to apply her tasks to someone I know. What I soon realised was that I had the privilege of being raised by a good woman. This is a tribute to her but also an encouragement for every other woman because, with God's help, any one of us can be a good woman.

A good woman's first characteristic is trustworthiness. My mother was a minister but she also handled the household finances, the finances of the church she and my dad pastored, the Theological College they ran and also the missions department, countrywide, of the church. Everything that she did was done without salary or compensation of any kind. She was totally trustworthy and we must be too. Trustworthiness can be shown in many ways, by keeping our word, by punctuality, by faithful attendance of services, by returning something that is borrowed or doing our work well. In *Daniel 6:4* "So the other officials tried to find something to accuse Daniel of in his duties for the kingdom. But they couldn't find anything wrong because he was trustworthy. No error or fault could be found." That great man of faith lived his testimony through his work.

A good woman is never spiteful and treats those she loves with generosity. She shops around for bargains and enjoys handwork. I remember so well going shopping with my mother for a winter coat when I was 13. I had seen a black coat that I really wanted but black was taboo for anyone my age at that time and I was trying to persuade my mother otherwise. While we were waiting

to cross a street I turned to speak to her and my face was close to hers and she noticed for the first time that I had secretly plucked my eyebrows rather drastically. I was the eldest child and this was her first encounter with teenage behaviour. (Remember this was years ago - almost in the dark ages!). She was very angry with me and I fully expected some punishment but instead she said to me "You have disappointed me because you did not trust me to understand and we will talk about this later, but let's go and get that coat now". That black coat was a treasured possession and I tried very hard not to disappoint my mother again. She taught me by example. To be spiteful in the sense that is used in the bible means to abuse and that is something we should all avoid at any cost. A good woman does not abuse power or wealth or position or any gift that God has blessed her with.

A good woman is like a trading ship that brings back surprises, says verse 14. How can I use my mother as an example of that? Well, she was a reader and encouraged us to read and explore the world in that way. Everyone was welcome in our home and visitors from all over made us eager to find out more about the parts of the world they came from. On our family holidays and other trips we were taken to all areas of South Africa and when we were teenagers my folks took my sister and I with them to the USA for 5 months, when they went on a mission's promotion trip. To gain knowledge of other parts of the world teaches us to be tolerant and to realise that God made us all in his image. *Ephesians 4:2* says, "Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another." Tolerance of different cultures and ideas and methods shows love to others in the way that God loves us.

Mom was not up before dawn like the good woman of verse Proverbs 31 but she was an organiser par excellence. She trained her domestic helpers very well and her household ran smoothly. She had a grocery list next to the phone and once a week she phoned the grocer who had the goods delivered. She worked out menus and my dad would go to the butcher and fishmonger and buy what we needed. She made lists and ticked off whatever was done. There are many references to good organisation in the bible for example *Exodus 18:21* "And then you need to keep a sharp eye out for competent men--men who fear God, men of integrity, men who are incorruptible--and appoint them as leaders over groups organized by the thousand, by the hundred, by fifty, and by ten." We can do so much more for God if our lives are well organised.

We lived in parsonages and yet my mother took care of the gardens meticulously - she needed help because she was very frail physically but she was the motivator and when they had saved the necessary funds she encouraged my dad to buy a house for their retirement and in this way she fulfilled the criteria in verse 16. We need to be good stewards of what God has blessed us with financially and use it wisely not only for ourselves, but also for the furtherance of God's kingdom and to take care of family members and others who are needy. As Paul writes in *1Timothy 5:8* "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially his family, he has denied the faith".

My mom spent a lot of time in her bed. Her body was really weak but her spirit was strong and she worked from early to late. I have an old black and white photo of her sitting up in her bed, which is hardly visible for all the books on it. For many years she lectured in the college in the morning, after having written, translated and typed the lectures previously. In the afternoons she did the necessary accountancy and in the evenings attended church services or went to visit church members with my dad and then came home to prepare for the next day's lectures. The good woman of verses 17 and 18 was very evident in our home. To work is part of God's plan for all of us - right in the beginning of the world God set the example by labouring for 6 days and resting for 1. Not all of us work for salaries but that does not mean that we should do less than our best at whatever tasks we have. Our secular work ethic will impact on others and may lead them to ask about our faith.

Mom always had a knitting project on the go and my sister and I were dressed alike in dresses and cardigans she made for us (of course this became a problem when we grew older). She knitted for herself and my dad as well. Our home was tastefully furnished and everything in it was cared for and treated as precious. She achieved this on an extremely limited budget and as

young children we never felt that there was any shortage. She was a very good hostess and we spent Christmastime at home and because we lived at the coast we always had family and friends visiting us and I cannot remember my mother ever being stressed about having to feed a lot of people. Verses 19, 21 and 22 describe her well. The first mention in the bible of making clothes more effective than fig leaves is in *Genesis 3:21* "And the LORD God made clothes out of animal skins for Adam and his wife, and he clothed them." We are certainly following God's plan by clothing our family and hospitality is encouraged all through the bible as in *3 John 1:5* "Dear friend, when you extend hospitality to Christian brothers and sisters, even when they are strangers, you make the faith visible." And we all know the verse "Do not be forgetful of hospitality, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it", which is found in *Hebrews 13:2*.

After my mom died I heard from many people whom she had helped. Some I had never heard of and others who I thought were acquaintances regarded her as a special friend because she had helped them, with advice and sympathy love and care. She reached out to all who needed her and anyone who was employed by her learned to love her dearly. In church circles she was respected and my dad valued her opinion and advice. The way my dad regarded my mom was an integral part of my formative years and helped me realise that women can do anything with God's help. Verses 20 and 23 were part of her life and she did not talk about what she did as is instructed in *Matthew 6:3* "But when you help a needy person, do it in such a way that even your closest friend will not know about it." It is often easy for us to help if we are seen to do so, but that is not what God requires of us. The help we give is to glorify God and not ourselves.

My mom did not sell any of her handwork as the woman in *Proverbs* did but she wrote and published several booklets and in that way her creative ability was shared with others. For many years her booklets of Sunday School plays were available in Christian bookstores and other writings were given to the women's ministry of the church to sell for their funds. She was always elegantly dressed and once, in the USA, a friend begged my mom to give her the suit she was wearing. It was one of my mom's favourite suits but she gave it to her friend even though it was not easy for her to part with it. We had a lot of photos of our trip and whenever my mom saw a photo of herself wearing that suit, she made a wry comment about how good she had looked in it - her sense of humour and ability to laugh at herself endeared her to us all. The abilities in verses 24 and 25 were also evident in her life and we too should share as we read in *Romans 12:8* "if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face."

Verse 26 says "When she speaks she has something worthwhile to say, and she always says it kindly" and that definitely does not apply to ministers only. When we speak we must be sure that what we are saying is true and relevant. A chatterbox who talks just for the sake of hearing her own voice is not a blessing to anyone. Raising our voices in anger or showing contempt for others by our tone of voice is not the way a good woman should speak. My mom was a very good speaker and often addressed large gatherings but what I remember is that she never raised her voice. She was not an angel and did get angry and she and my dad had differences of opinion and problems but she never lost her dignity whatever the situation. The way we speak to others is the way they remember being treated and *1 Peter 2:17* says, "Treat everyone you meet with dignity. Love your spiritual family. Revere God. Respect the government." And that describes a true Christian lifestyle.

We did not have a big family - just the four of us - but my mother had a big extended household to take care of. There was our family and then we had a boarder living with us as well as 2 lodgers in apartments attached to our house, the students boarding at the college, the housekeeper and her helper, the gardener and various part-time employees. Mom may have spent part of almost every day in her bed but she still had her finger on the pulse of everything that happened on the property, including whether I was reading instead of doing my homework! To my childish mind *Proverbs 31:27* could have been her motto "She keeps an eye on everyone in

her household, and keeps them all busy and productive.” She was doing what God wants us all to do as we read in 1 Corinthians 15:58 *“So then, my dear friends, stand firm and steady. Keep busy always in your work for the Lord, since you know that nothing you do in the Lord’s service is ever useless.”* Caring for our families and homes and washing the dishes at church is just as much the Lord’s work as preaching and praying is.

My dad chose the words from the 1953 Afrikaans translation of Proverbs 31.10 *“haar waarde is ver bo korale.”* (*“her value is far above rubies”*) for my mother’s grave stone and whenever I think of it, I think of good things she did. My mother was not the only good woman I know and I think that if we read and reread this passage and apply it to our own lives, verse by verse, we will find that we are good women in the making. Each one of us knows how much we fall short of God’s prescription for us but we need not be despondent because we can read the prescription every day.

To me verse 30 is the all-important verse in the passage - *“The woman to be admired and praised is the woman who lives in the Fear-of-GOD.”* Nothing we do for our families or others or in the workplace is in vain and it all glorifies God, but we must always be aware that the God must be revered and worshipped and praised, because we can only be good women with his help and by his grace.