

The Virtuous Woman

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Introduction.

- A. One of the biggest struggles that we face as students of God's word is to read the text for what it actually says, rather than imposing our own perspectives and biases on it. A passage where we can really wrestle with this is Titus 2:4-5. This is particularly true with the phrase "keepers at home." When we look at this Scriptural idea, much of the time, our minds automatically jump to Little Suzy Homemaker from the 1950s, who vacuums the carpet in pearls and high heels and always has a meat loaf in the oven for dinner. From this, we often conclude that God expects all women to stay at home, and that any woman who works outside the home is somehow doing something wrong. As a result, many Christian women feel guilty every time they go to work.
- B. The problem is that the text doesn't actually say that. The Greek word translated "keeper at home" is *oikodespotes*, literally the "house-despot." It's a word that is also used in Scripture to describe Christ as the head of the household of the church. Clearly, then, whatever the role of the woman in the family, she is responsible for more than just picking up after the other family members.
- C. To understand more fully what "keeping at home" entails, we need to turn not to the New Testament, but to an Old Testament passage that almost certainly describes what God has in mind here. Let's look this morning, then, at Proverbs 31, and what it has to say to Christian women today about being a virtuous woman.

I. Trustworthy, Industrious, Compassionate, Foresighted.

- A. In Proverbs 31, the first characteristic that King Lemuel's mother highlights is that she is **TRUSTWORTHY**. This appears in Proverbs 31:10-12. As the text tells us, her husband trusts her, and she proves herself worthy of that trust by doing him good and not evil all the days of her life. This means, then, that if a wife is virtuous, she needs to be committed to her husband's welfare, so that he doesn't have to worry where her loyalty lies.
- B. There are many ways in which this trustworthiness should manifest itself. The first and most obvious is that the trustworthy wife won't cheat on her husband, but sexual faithfulness is not the only faithfulness that God requires. Instead, she needs to take care of everything with which he entrusts her. A trustworthy wife can be counted on to be financially responsible. She would rather do without than spend her family into the poorhouse, which is why it says here that the husband will have no lack of gain. Likewise, the trustworthy wife can be trusted with her husband's good name. She doesn't gossip about him or talk about him behind his back or do anything else that will diminish his reputation among others. To cite just one more example, the trustworthy wife can be trusted with her husband's children. Rather than neglecting them or teaching them the values of the world, she will do everything she can to help her husband raise them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. In these three areas, and in many more, the virtuous woman is trustworthy.
- C. King Lemuel's mother then goes on to show how the virtuous woman is **INDUSTRIOUS**. This appears in Proverbs 31:13-18. This is quite a list, friends, and it's not even a complete one! In the description of the virtuous woman, more attention is devoted to her hardworking nature than to any other attribute.
- D. Notice, though, that even though the activities described here include domestic chores, they are not limited to them. This woman does not fit neatly into the mold of Little Suzy Homemaker. She is a real-estate speculator as well as a cook, a small-business owner as well as a gardener. She's up early making sure that everybody in her household has something to eat. She's up late making things to sell in the marketplace. The overall impression with which she leaves us is one of relentless energy, of someone who will do whatever it takes to make sure that her family is provided for and cared for, and is not afraid to step outside the home to do it.
- E. This can be a challenging portrait for us to deal with in many ways. In at least one congregation that I'm familiar with, when the women of the church needed to make some extra money, they would start cleaning houses for other people. Here's why: they thought it was a sin to work outside the home, but as long as they weren't outside somebody's home, that was OK. Folks, there is no need for the Christian woman to engage in such Pharisaical line-drawing! Certainly, women do have responsibilities within the home. In particular, they will be held accountable for the part that they have in raising their children. However, to say that the godly woman must stay at home and do nothing else is not a Scriptural idea. Her industry can involve much more.
- F. However, even though the virtuous woman has a good grasp of money and finances and how to provide, she still knows how to be **COMPASSIONATE**. Consider the text of Proverbs 31:20. This tells us that the woman of God should never allow her circumstances to curtail her generosity to those in need. This generosity can manifest itself in any number of ways. She can be generous with her money, her time, or even with her sympathy. She can direct her generosity toward poor strangers, friends and acquaintances who need help, or most of all, toward the needs felt by brothers and sisters in Christ. God wants us to have a compassionate and merciful spirit toward everyone we encounter, but He most especially wants us to have it in the context of the church. I don't know of any pressing financial needs at Margaret St. right now, but I certainly know of

brethren who desperately need a gift of time and love. I have no doubt that Sister Hall, Sister Lee, and all of our other shut-ins would be thankful for all the visits that the sisters of this congregation can offer them, and I'm equally certain that God would be pleased with that too. Let's work, then, on being compassionate.

- G. Next in line, we learn that the virtuous woman is **FORESIGHTED**. Consider how she is described in Proverbs 31:21-22. This is not a virtue that is particularly popular today. Most people in this country, men and women alike, are quite frankly lousy at looking into the future. Just look at the current housing crisis. One of the main things that caused it is that millions of Americans greedily bought more house than they could afford using complicated, exotic mortgages, failing to realize that in a year or two, the rates would reset, and they would be driven into foreclosure by crippling house payments. The virtuous woman needs to be better than that. She needs to look into the future, to have a good handle not just on what is happening that affects her family now, but what will happen to affect them later. Nor does she have to be a prophetess to do this. It comes as no surprise to any of us that cars break down, roofs start leaking, kids get sick, and wage-earners get old. Rather than embracing and promoting a paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle, the virtuous woman needs to remember these things. She needs to work together with her husband so that her family is prepared when winter comes, whether that winter is literal or metaphorical. Only then can she truly claim to be foresighted.

II. Wise, Successful, Godly.

- A. This foresightedness is part of the virtuous woman's character because she is a **WISE** woman. We see this revealed in Proverbs 31:26. The scope of this wise teaching is defined in 1 Timothy 2. There, Paul says that in a religious context, women are not to teach or exercise authority over men. That's why, for instance, we don't have women teaching our adult Bible classes. However, Paul continues to say that the memory of the woman will be preserved in her children as those children live lives that are pleasing to God. This is why it's so important for women to be versed in wisdom and kindness. I often wonder, friends, how much good I do as a preacher, how many of the sermons I preach change a single thing in the minds and hearts of my audience. I don't have to wonder, though, about the impact that a godly woman can have in the lives of her children. There are women in this room right now who struggled with husbands who were hostile to the gospel to lead their children to become Christians. There are women in this room right now who may fight another battle in that war before they come back to services tonight. Let me tell you, friends, I'm proud to be associated with sisters like that. I'm proud to be numbered with women who love the truth too much to give up.
- B. Whatever their circumstances, though, women who wish to be virtuous must speak with wisdom and kindness. This wisdom, though, must apply not just to what is said, but to how and when it is said. Nobody likes a know-it-all or a nag, and husbands especially don't like it. What the virtuous woman learns to do is to pick her moments, to make sure that the wisdom she has to share will be received with the respect it deserves.
- C. Her skill in this is shown by the fact that she is **SUCCESSFUL** in what she does. Look at how she is described in Proverbs 31:27-29. This says a great deal about her mindset and her determination. There are two ways that all of us, men and women alike, can consider our lives. We can view ourselves as the helpless prisoners of forces beyond our control, so that our successes and failures are the result of chance rather than our efforts. Alternatively, we can view ourselves as the ones who determine the course of our lives, who, with God's help, are capable of surmounting the obstacles before us and achieving our goals. One of these viewpoints is helpful; one is not. If we allow ourselves to become passengers in our own lives, we will never lack for excuses to explain our failures. If, together with God, we take control, we will never need excuses.
- D. The successes of the virtuous woman appear in three main areas of her life: in her stewardship of the household, in her relationship with her children, and in her relationship with her husband. I don't know from personal experience, obviously, but from the outside looking in, it seems that the key to success in these three areas is knowing how to balance them. All three areas are important. All three can easily consume all the time that a virtuous woman has to offer. What she must do, then, is to distinguish between what is essential and what is not, so that she succeeds not just in one area, but in all three.
- E. Finally, though, the virtuous woman must be **GODLY**. The author says so in Proverbs 31:30. This is the last characteristic of the virtuous woman that she describes, and this is an appropriate place for it. I would imagine that most Christian women, as they read through the list of the other things that virtuous women are supposed to be, find themselves intimidated by it. It's a truly imposing catalog of virtues, and I doubt that all of these virtues to this degree are found in any one real woman at all. Lemuel's mother is not describing a woman who actually exists, but rather an ideal of womanhood for which all women must strive.
- F. However, as wonderful and imposing as all the rest of this description is, it is all meaningless without godliness. The true goal of the virtuous woman is not to keep a good house or please her children or please her husband, but to please God. In fact, she excels at all of those other things precisely because of her desire to please God, and in Him is where she finds the strength and determination to do them. Just as 2 Peter 1 says, her virtue comes from her faith. As she draws closer to God, she finds that all the other pieces of her life fall into place. Conversely, if she begins to drift away from Him, everything else falls apart too.

Conclusion. If you desire the hope and strength that a relationship with God brings, come to Him now.