



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"A Noble Woman" - Grit and Grace Sermon Series

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## **P**roverbs 31:10-31

*A noble woman who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. 13 She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. 14 She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away. 15 She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and tasks for her servant-girls. 16 She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.*

*18 She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. 20 She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid for her household when it snows, for all her household are clothed in crimson. 22 She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land. 24 She makes*

*linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. 26 She speaks with wisdom, and she teaches with kindness 27 She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband too, and he praises her: 29 "Many women have done noble things, but you surpass them all." 30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. 31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works praise her in the city gates.*

Today we continue our sermon series on women in the bible, which we are calling Grit and Grace, and today we come across someone who is not an actual person. She is a poetic expression of the character of a woman who is strong, wise, diligent, God-centered; in a word Noble.

First off, I want to make a confession. In preparing this sermon I asked a number of women about their thoughts and reflections on this passage. I did that because as I started

researching and reading commentaries on Proverbs 31, I realized I wasn't hearing any female voices. So I thought let me just ask some women in our church and read some female Christian thought leaders online about this passage. And man, I'm so glad I did.

To be honest, I was more than a little surprised to hear how many women struggled with this (fictitious) woman in Proverbs 31. Maybe "struggled" is too kind a word. In some cases it was more like disdained.

One woman seemed to summarize the thoughts of many women by saying: "The Proverbs 31 woman can be a little like comparing yourself to Barbie. She doesn't exist and to think you have to be like her is just painful."

In fact, tragically one of the most often repeated statements to me by women was how men, particularly pastors, and other well meaning women leaders taught these verses in a way that brought real pain to their souls. It apparently has been taught in a way that created unrealistic expectations. As therapists often say, "Expectations are premeditated resentments."

The space between unrealistic expectations and the reality of life can often be filled with so much self-doubt, self-condemnation, and even a residual feeling of low self-worth because we can't measure up to what is expected. So if people expect you to be exactly like this woman, resentments are sure to follow.

So as a man and a pastor I want to sincerely apologize for any pain or resentment men or other spiritual leaders, male or female, have caused you with these verses. That should have never happened. Let me assure you the point of this passage is not, "You have to be her." Moreover, just because you are not married like her, a mother like her, or a tireless entrepreneur who wakes up early like her, doesn't mean you don't measure up as a woman before God.

Perhaps to better understand this passage I should point out something about the genre, or type of literature in which, the book of Proverbs sits. Proverbs are highly metaphorical and poetic. Poetry is not like discourse or narratives that may give directives, laws, or commandments. These verses in Proverbs 31 are not commandments that demand of you to be an early riser, an entrepreneur, a seamstress, fancy dresser, or a super mom, etc. (Whew, that exhausting just saying that).

I might be wrong here, but I don't think God is all that concerned about what time you wake up in the morning. I'm not

sure is He is all that concerned if you make or not make your own clothes. In fact, I'm sure He's more than happy you save time in life by shopping at Ross's.

So don't get hung up on the flurry of activity of this figure. Her activity is but the reflection and expression of her character and the grounding of her identity as a woman who "fears the Lord." And what I mean by that is, one who centers and organizes her life around God.

So I want to make this very clear from the outset: real women of biblical nobility are noble, not because they are a tireless, unfaltering, flawless, queens of domesticity. Rather it is because they find, and keep finding the love, forgiveness, identity, and worth that God gives them simply because they are His beloved daughters.

That being said, I want us to hold two truths together as we move along through these verses. They are from Christian writer Richard Foster.

Truth one is this: "*God loves you where you are at, not where you are supposed to be...*" That's truth one. Please hang on to that as we read further.

Truth two is this: "*...but He loves too much to let you stay that way.*" In other words, growth is His goal for your lives. I know that sounds a bit paradoxical, but try to hold these two realities together as we go down these verses.

As I have already pointed out you will never be more loved or

less loved than you are right now. Nothing you can do can change that. However, there is an invitation here to live at a greater level. Not a greater level of hyper-activity, but a greater level of substance, depth, and nobility.

Ok, so let's just look at a few features, which we are invited up into.

In verse 10 it says: "*A noble woman who can find? She is worth far more than jewels.*" By the way, the word, "woman" can mean both woman or wife. I make that point because although she is depicted here as a wife she is most basically a woman (this is why these verses can have wide application).

What I find fascinating here is that the word "Noble" in Hebrew means: might, strength, power; virtue, valor, and substance. If you ask me, that's a great picture of a very strong woman. Wouldn't you want to be a person like that?

Now let me point out something crucial here that may help save us from being resentful toward this passage. The expression, "a noble woman," is rarely used in the Old Testament. In fact, it is only used once of a real woman - and that woman was named Ruth.

If you remember from my sermon from last month, circumstantially, Ruth's life looked nothing like the life of the woman depicted in Proverbs 31.

**F**or most of her story, Ruth is neither a wife nor a mother. She didn't spend her days making clothes for her husband and family because for most of the book she had no husband; she was widowed.

Ruth's children didn't rise up and call her blessed because she was childless. And she didn't spend her days exchanging fine linens with the merchants and keeping an immaculate home. She worked all day in the sun, doing the backbreaking work of gleaning leftover grain from other people's fields, which indicated she was among the poorest of the poor in Israel.

However, as she is living this way people around her noticed something great about her. When Boaz, a prominent Jewish man, let's Ruth know how others see her - that is, how they see her *before* she gets married, *before* she has a child, *before* she becomes a wealthy and influential woman; He says this to her: "All my fellow townsmen (viz. all the people around you, Ruth) know that you are a woman of noble character." (Ruth 3:11). That is the exact same phrase in Hebrew as is used in Proverbs 31:10.

My point is, Ruth is identified as a noble woman, a woman of valor and virtue, not because she checked off some Proverbs 31 to-do list by getting married, keeping a clean house and producing children, etc. Rather she is called noble because she lived her life with incredible wisdom, strength, and love.

So be assured, the greatest real example of a noble woman was a single female, who was poor, suffered greatly, and was childless. Moreover, I refer to Ruth because her life expresses something absolutely crucial for women. It is not your roles or your marital status that is the crucial thing, but it is the Godly character you bring to those roles - whatever they are - that's the crucial thing. So what are some ways this nobility shines through in this proverb? I only have time to highlight a few things.

First, let's look at 31:11-12 says: 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

The word "trust," in Hebrew, expresses that sense of well-being and security. It connotes feeling safe. It's when a man has that sense of, "I can really depend on you. You are there for me. I know you have my best interest at heart." So a noble woman wants to see God's best arise not only in their spouses, but in their friends, co-workers, and others around her (that's why you see this woman doing good for her kids, her staff, and the poor, etc.). She wants God's best for all kinds of people.

Now here comes the other side of that verse, ladies, that's a little tougher to sit with. Are there ways you might harm the people, that is the men in your life? I don't mean that you are whacking them with a blunt object. I'm talking about the harm that comes from a sarcastic

word, a demeaning look, or giving the silent treatment etc.

Did you know research shows that the greatest threat to a marriage is not frequent arguing or conflict? It is when one or both spouses speak and act toward each other with contempt. (Some suggest its the biggest predictor of divorce!) What do I mean by contempt? It's that smirk, the tsk, the roll of the eyes, the put downs, and the passive aggressive digs (among other things). Ladies, in all seriousness, if I spoke to your husbands, or boyfriends, or sons would they go on and on about how much you build them up as a man; how much they are encouraged by you, understood by you, or made secure by you? Or would they give me a different picture?

I know these are difficult questions for a man to ask a woman, especially in light of how many women are abused by men. But when it comes to the issue of harming each other I need to ask the hard question of both genders if we are going to become the people God intended.

Now I want to make something clear here about doing good and no harm, etc. I do this because I think in Christian circles this can get misconstrued. The words "Does him good all the days of her life" does not mean: She never confronts him, never corrects him, or never disagrees with him, etc. These words are not a call to passivity, but a call to greater love.

**L**isten to one Christian writer, David Benner as he points out something very important about real love. *“Love cannot ignore things that are self-destructive in the loved one... The true soul friend will not accept our self-deceptions, but will gently and firmly confront us with our soul blindness. Soul friends want each other to settle for nothing short of becoming the whole and holy person they were called to be.”* That’s love.

True friends and spouses love each other enough to lovingly point out that which is harmful in the loved one. And they do that for a friend or spouse because they have the others’ best interest at heart. So it is good for a woman to speak up when a man is straying from Gods’ best. You do him much good when you do that, ladies.

Now men, I have to ask you a hard question. Do you make it easy for your spouse, girlfriend, or daughters to do you good by speaking the truth to you? Can you be emotionally and relationally strong enough to welcome such love? What is the cost to your soul, your family, and your relationships if you cannot be that man who welcomes that kind of love?

For the sake of time let’s slide down to verses 25-26: *“Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. 26 She speaks with wisdom, and she teaches with kindness.”*

As a man, I have noticed that clothes, for many woman, seems to be a very serious issue. However, for me I am what you call,

“Fashionably Challenged.” When my son was a toddler I brought him to church and dropped him off at nursery. When I did, the woman just held him up with her hands and kind of looked around at him and then immediately said out loud so I can hear it: “Oh, I see daddy dressed you today, didn’t he?!” Okay, so I’ll never get a job as a fashion designer. But my point here is that the writer doesn’t mind a woman dressing well. Verses 21-22 make that clear. One can be a fine dresser. However, the writer is calling women up into even finer clothing.

Dignity is one of those traits, which is not often spoken of in church or small groups or in discipleship relationships. I’m not sure why. Maybe its because we Americans think it sounds so stuffy, but dignity is important. It expresses living in a way that commands respect and esteem. When I asked a woman what does a woman with dignity sound like, look like, or lead like? She wrote me this:

“She looks strong and confident without the need to please, prove, or push her way up. She is respected and trusted in what she does because of *how* she does it. And this is true whether she is a CEO, a teacher, an admin assistant, or mother at home. She relates to people with truth and integrity, and therein lays her success.” That sounds like a pretty solid woman.

I thought she gave a great insight because the other word paired with Dignity is Strength. Strength here not only pertains to

physical strength, but to be mentally and emotionally strong. Later on as we will consider the unique challenges of women we’ll understand why these two traits are so crucial in a woman’s life. So keep them in mind.

In this vein of strength and dignity, the writer also emphasizes Wisdom.

One author, who writes on wisdom, used a unique term to describe what wisdom is. He called it, “Improvisational Intelligence.” In other words, it’s that adaptable and skillful application of good in the gray areas of life. Wisdom is the ability to respond well to those times and conditions when the lines aren’t clear, where the situation is ambiguous and uncertain.

At various times from this pulpit, many of you have heard me say that to live life is to live often in ambiguity. When I am counseling someone, I don’t always know what to say or do. When I am leading a meeting there arises all kinds of things I didn’t see coming. When my wife’s upset and hurt I’m not always sure how to respond. You get the idea. Ambiguity is everywhere.

In fact, many decisions we make in life, perhaps a vast majority, are not clear-cut: Whom do we marry? What should I major in? Do I move here to take this job or do I move there to take that one? etc. As I said, ambiguity is everywhere.

**S**ometimes, data, facts, and laws may help inform you, yet sometimes nothing seems to add up to say: "This THE way to go. This is THE correct answer. Go forth and do this." And this is why wisdom is not a nice option for a woman, but absolutely crucial in a world where ambiguity is everywhere. So a woman who takes time to think deeply about what she is dealing with and prayerfully pauses and ponders before acting or speaking is indeed a noble woman. My sisters, be wise and you will make this world a whole lot better.

Now we come to one of the most important statements in this chapter. 31:30 says: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." I think this is a gigantic statement in our culture today for a lot of reasons. First notice, it's not a woman who is married with a spotless house who is to be praised. It's not the mom with perfectly behaved child who is to be praised. Nor is it the woman who has become the entrepreneur of the year who is to be praised. Rather it is a woman who honors God by centering and organizing her identity around the God who loves her. That's what the phrase "fear of the Lord" implies.

When our identity is centered on and forged by the God who loves us, we rise from and stand upon something that is unassailable, unshakable, and unbreakable no matter what anyone ever says because your identity is forged from the thoughts of God and not the thoughts of men.

As I studied for this sermon I looked at research articles that dealt with some of the unique challenges of women as they relate to things like Identity, Beauty, and "Charm." As I did, I came across some alarming statistics.

Three out of four women have some sort of body image struggle. 81% of girls 10 years old have a deep fear of being overweight and fat. In fact, 40% of girls at age 10 start dieting. Moreover, scientific research has shown simply viewing a Barbie doll reduces body esteem and increases a desire for thinness in girls aged 5-8 years.

And the eating disorder called Anorexia Nervosa, has the highest death rate of any psychiatric illness (including major depression) for young women. The mortality rate associated with anorexia is 12 times higher than the death rate of any other cause of death for females between the ages of 15-24. My sisters when I read all this it broke my heart.

Just think of all the healing that can happen in a women's soul if we took these verses to heart. Think of what would happen if we, as in both men and women, lived into the truth of verse 30. Think of what would happen if women sent each other the message that being a woman who loves, worships, and finds her honor from God is a far greater goal than beauty or thinness, etc. Think of the change that can take place if women truly believed that being a woman of valor and nobility far

outweighs good looks or the perfect figure. What would happen to the comparison issues that go on between women?

Imagine if men sent women the message that your priority as a man was how a woman built her identity on the worship of God. And what if the church community could be that one place where women never have to fear being ashamed as to what they are physically?

This is why I love, as man, the surrounding verses of verse 30 (namely, verses 28,29 and 31). I love them because they are pictures of men honoring and praising women as they deserve!

Look at verses 28, 29 and 31: *"28 Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband too, and he praises her: 29 Many women have done noble things, but you surpass them all." 31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works praise her in the city gates.*" Notice we see a picture of a man praising his spouse *to other men*. That is what "the city gates" imply. It's where you would find the leading men of the city meeting to talk about communal concerns or other important matters. So this man is praising his wife to them.

Men, when was the last time you brought praise to your wife. When did you praise her to other with men instead of having a gripe fest? Or when was the last time you fathers praised your daughters, or you brothers your sisters? When is the last time you bosses expressed genuine value for your employees?

I was talking with a female administrative assistant who shared a story where she experienced some of what we are talking about in these verses. One day she came into her office and on her desk was flowers. She found out they were from one of her bosses. She asked why he did it he said it was to express his appreciation for all the hard work she had been doing. And when I asked what she felt in that moment, she said something I think is so important to every woman's heart: "I felt valued." Ladies is that something that is important for you? Something that you appreciate? Is that something that builds you up?

Some men might think, "Why is this something I have to say so frequently?" Why is it such a crucial thing for a woman to feel so often?"

I'll tell you the reason. It is because of the world she lives in. Let me tell you about her world. It's a world where one out of three women are beaten by an intimate partner; one out of 10 will be raped by an intimate partner (Its one in seven in Hawaii); one out of four will be abused in some way by someone in their lifetime. It's a world where they feel even from five years old that they have to be thin like Barbie and by age 10 they are dieting because they don't feel who they are is enough. That's why it's crucial that they hear and feel valued, that they feel cherished *often*.

Did you know that to this day in many Jewish homes, on the Sabbath, these verses are traditionally prayed or read

before the father blesses the Sabbath? Catch that, before they bless the Sabbath the husband blesses and praises and honors his wife. In other words, he purposefully spends time to celebrate the glory of God in her. Do you think such an act would build a tremendous amount of security in the kids and set a great precedent in how spouses are to treat each other?

How many women have had important men in their lives, be it a dad, a boss, a mentor, a husband, a son, a co-worker, who has spoken words of praise or words of potential into a woman's life? How many women have had men encourage them by seeing in them what they cannot see in themselves?

Brothers and sisters, I want you to catch something here that is crucial to understanding and experiencing this passage, especially as a woman. After 30 1/2 chapters talking about Wisdom to men, this book hits its crescendo like the end of a fireworks display. And what do we see as the crescendo of wisdom? A Noble Woman. And what is crescendo of the crescendo? It is a Man honoring a Woman.

As several theologians point out, this ending is like a replay of Genesis chapter two, when God created Man and Women to be equal partners. When He created them to be equal in stature, wisdom, dignity, value, and fearlessness; Life as it was meant to be as a man and a woman.

My brothers, we are here on this planet, in part, to lift up our

sisters to become all that God intended. We are here to help her live into the truth of God and not believe in or live from the lies that drain life from her.

Ladies, as we close can I ask you to begin spending time reflecting with a gracious honesty (and it needs to be gracious) about the lies you have believed and internalized over the years. Reflect on the lies that create in you the belief you don't measure up, that God does not cherish you as you are, faults and all. And can I ask that you to take this journey of reflection with someone who has a black belt in listening and in wisdom - and not just an advice giver. You will need others in this process to heal those wounds.

To close out we want you to listen deeply to a song that I think strikes at the heart of the journey of so many women; that journey of the struggle to push back the lies we have internalized and instead let God's unshakeable truths forge who you are in the deepest places of your identity. It's called, "You Say." Will you let these words begin to tear down the soul crushing messages of shame, inadequacy and not being enough? What is God saying to you this morning?

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