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Proverbs 31:10-31
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit.

Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.

Perhaps having an understanding of this distinction might usefully be added to the attributes of the wife of noble character described in Proverbs 31!

This woman is an industrious homemaker, a caring and providing mother, an astute and entrepreneurial business woman, a charitable neighbour, and a respected member of the wider community. She brings honour to herself, to her husband, and to her God. She is of inestimable worth – she is “above rubies”!

It is a lovely passage in many ways. Some have used it at the funeral of a beloved wife or mother to express and affirm something of the qualities they see in their loved one.

But others have struggled with it, and some have repudiated it entirely, seeing it as an unhealthy and unrealistic portrayal of women.¹ Even if we note that the woman portrayed here is not *defined* in terms of the men in her life and defies cultural gender stereotypes – a distinct positive given the high concentration of attention paid to men in the book of Proverbs overall² – the problem remains that husbands, and men in general, might use this text as a means of oppression, heaping up a burden of duty and expectation on the women in their lives.

We might do well to say something like “Knowledge is knowing what the text says; Wisdom is about what we do with it.”

Proverbs 31 is not a blueprint for a Christian wife, nor a marriage preparation book for young ladies. It is not a courtship guide to help young men select an ideal partner.³ This is not a description of a particular woman, nor even the ideal woman.

¹ Strollo “Commentary”

² Atkinson, *Proverbs*, p.167; Strollo “Commentary”

³ These possibilities suggested, rhetorically, by Atkinson, *Proverbs*, p.168

Proverbs 31 is actually about wisdom, and true wisdom is first of all an attribute of *God*.

Over recent weeks we have taken a few brief dips into the book of Proverbs, and the passages selected have all referred to a character, “Lady Wisdom”: the attribute of wisdom, poetically personified as a woman. Notice how today’s passage finishes the whole book with these words about the wife of noble character, “let her works bring her praise at the city gate”.⁴ This mirrors the pictures in chapters 1 and 8 where Lady Wisdom is introduced, calling out and making her speech at the city gates.

There are other clues to the fact that this passage is not intended as a literal description of any individual, but rather sums up wisdom as set out throughout the whole book. If we look back over the book, we find that the qualities now celebrated in this “wife of noble character” are the sorts of things that earlier have been used to describe and celebrate the virtue of wisdom. For example:⁵

- Like the wife of noble character, Wisdom is “more precious than jewels”.⁶
- Like the wife, Wisdom is present in economic situations⁷ and works diligently with her hands and is rewarded.⁸
- Like the wife, Wisdom is prudent and considerate,⁹ and following wisdom leads one to a fruitful life.¹⁰
- Like the wife, Wisdom works to the upbuilding of household and family,¹¹ and blessedness surrounds Wisdom and those who follow her.¹²

Finally, we note that in the original Hebrew this passage is an acrostic – a form in which each stanza starts with consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, this is *poetry*.

⁴ Proverbs 31:31

⁵ The following list comes from Strollo, “Commentary”, together with the reference information I have footnoted below. Atkinson, *Proverbs*, has some additional parallels – see p.168

⁶ Proverbs 3:15; 31:10. See also 20:15

⁷ Note the repeated use of the Hebrew root sakhar (“income,” “merchandise,” “trade”; 3:14; 31:14, 18).

⁸ 3:16; 31:13–20.

⁹ Hebrew zamam; 1:4; 8:12; 31:16.

¹⁰ 8:19; 31:16, 31.

¹¹ 14:1; 31:21–27.

¹² 3:18; 31:28

Proverbs 31 is about the wisdom which is of God's own nature and which flows from God to us, his children.

Early in the book of Proverbs we are introduced to the contrasting images of Lady Wisdom and Mistress Folly, personifications of two very different approaches to life. And now in chapter 31 we are introduced to the very embodiment of Lady Wisdom: wisdom is *lived out* in the decisions and actions of this wife of noble character.¹³

In my opening saying – “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.” – there is a contrast between knowledge as something that remains in the head, while wisdom is expressed in an *action* (albeit implied by the negative in this case!)

God's wisdom “is no esoteric concept which floats in some mystical realm, out of touch with the ordinary world. The Wisdom of God is here expressed in the creativity, responsibility, and artistry of managing a home, providing for the needs of others, and taking a stand on the side of the poor.” Proverbs 31 is “a wonderful illustration of Wisdom embodied, Wisdom lived out, Wisdom at home!”¹⁴ We have here a “glimpse of wisdom at work – wisdom on the ground.”¹⁵

“The interesting thing about Proverbs is how unreligious the book is. There is nothing about the temple, the priests or sacrifice. There is a lot about street corners, houses, rooftops, jewels and animals. There is hardly anything about religious ceremonies. There is a lot about love, justice and concern for the poor.”¹⁶

“It is a book which seldom takes you to church. Like its own figure of Wisdom, it calls across to you in the street about some everyday matter, or points things out at home. Its function in Scripture is to put godliness into working clothes; to name business and society as spheres in which we are to acquit ourselves with credit to our Lord, and in which we are to look for His training.”¹⁷

¹³ Wright, *Twelve*, 107

¹⁴ Atkinson, *Proverbs*, 168-169

¹⁵ Strollo, “Commentary”

¹⁶ Atkinson, *Proverbs*, p.170

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity, 1964, quoted in Atkinson, *Proverbs*, p.170-171

There is to be no separation or difference between our religious selves and our secular selves; no difference between the standards of behaviour we exhibit in the church from what we do in the world, in our daily activities and interactions in family, work, social settings. There should be a distinctive flavour about us as Christians that is noticeable out in our worldly interactions.

But we need to recognise that there is much in the world that would drag us away from godly wisdom. This is what James is writing about. There is a worldly wisdom which is not of God. The world says that wisdom lies in getting ahead, in looking after Number 1. The worldly wisdom is characterised by bitterness, envy, selfishness, boasting, falseness. The worldly wisdom prompts us to disunity and division, to restlessness, to meanness in thought, word and deed.

The sad reality is that this worldly wisdom can be found within the church down the ages and today. Bible scholar Alec Motyer, writing 40 years ago, remarked in very direct terms that “We look about us and see fellowships being sundered – sometimes in the name of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of fellowship himself! ... We look about us and find Christians being catty and petty, as anxious to keep their end up, and to defend their rights, and so on, as the next man. It does not look as if we believe James when he says that all that is mean lacks heavenly validation. We need to ask ourselves very seriously whether we believe James or not.”¹⁸

Jesus’ disciples could have done with a good dose of James. We see in Mark 9 that they were as caught up in worldly wisdom as anyone.

This is the second time Jesus has told his disciples that his destiny lies in death. And they just don’t get it. They don’t get it because in their understanding, in worldly expectations, betrayal, humiliation, and murder just don’t fit with how one becomes Messiah (King).

Paul wrote that

... the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... Jews demand signs and

¹⁸ Motyer, *James*, p.135

Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.¹⁹

The disciples' lack of understanding is showed up in part in their quarrelling over who's going to be the greatest. They live in a culture preoccupied with social status and perhaps imagine that as companions of the King, they are guaranteed of being held in the highest esteem, to enjoy all the privileges of high office.

But Jesus won't have it. "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all" he declares.

Jesus then provides a little object lesson. He takes a little child and stands this child among them. In that culture a child epitomised the most subservient human, one with the slightest status. The Greek word for little child, *paidion*, was also used for "slave". Yes, within their families children were loved and cared for; but within society they had no standing.²⁰

Wisdom is not an attribute we regularly ascribe to children, but the Gospel illustrates that what passes for adult wisdom is often not really wise at all.

Jesus stands the little child among them, embraces the child, and says "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

To be welcomed in the name of the King is to be received as the King's ambassador. The words and actions and bearing of an ambassador should speak of the standing and purposes of the King he or she represents... and Jesus the King chooses a little child, a slave, to represent him!

Over against the wisdom of the world and its many manifestations, the wisdom of God teaches us that "greatness is determined by weakness and vulnerability. By

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25

²⁰Black, "Commentary"

service and sacrifice. By humility and honour. By truthfulness and faithfulness. We are called to preach this kind of greatness, we are called to embody this kind of greatness, so that the world can witness the true meaning of greatness born out of love.”²¹

I began with a silly saying making a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. The distinction between the wisdom of the world and godly wisdom is of much greater gravity. In response to what Jesus has done for us in actions the disciples’ thought foolish, we are called to strive to live in the way of the wisdom that God alone imparts.

Knowledge may be knowing what godliness is.

Wisdom is putting godliness into practice.

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²¹ Lewis, “The Greatest”