

A WORTHY WOMAN

Introduction

Whether they realize it or not, contemporary feminists are searching for Kathrine Kersten's grandmother, and her grandmother is a reflection of the godly woman of Proverbs.

Let me explain. In the feminist bestsellers of the 1960's and '70's, women were portrayed as being "empty vessels." In *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963, Betty Friedan spoke of women as being "empty," "infantile" creatures, lacking "a core of human self." Women were presented as being timid, weak, bewildered creatures. They are defined by their sufferings and victimhood—their only statement of identity was that of a victim and a sufferer, according to these feminist writers. They were viewed as being easily threatened, unable to stand alone; only comfortable when operating within the pack, or "sisterhood" of fellow-sufferers.

Over the past 30 years influential feminist writers have continued to portray women in the same way: an empty vessel in search of identity, meaning, purpose. In 1983 Gloria Steinem wrote of her struggle to make herself "real" and overcome her nagging "feelings of non-existence" (*Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*.) In 1993 Susan Faluchi wrote that women are "blind to their own interests and abilities" and continue to "live in the shadows," groping "in the dark" for purpose and direction (*Backlash*.)

Why is she so weak and vulnerable? Because, unlike Kathrine Kersten's grandmother, she seems to have little idea of who she is, what she believes, or how she should live. According to Kathrine Kersten,

[My grandmother and great-grandmother] knew who they were, why they were here, and what they had to do. They had well-considered ideas about what the good life is, and they had the internal resources of virtue and character necessary to live that life. They were strong women, like the industrious woman of "noble character" praised in Proverbs 31. (*Christianity Today*, June 20, 1994, p.22)

In our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs we come to consider what the LORD has to say to us about the Worthy Woman.

I. Be A Worthy Woman, by Developing a Virtuous Character

A VIRTUOUS CHARACTER INCLUDES INTEGRITY: COMMITMENT TO GOD'S MORAL STANDARD.

A worthy woman ... is worth far more than rubies. (Prov. 31:10)

The Hebrew word (כָּלִיל) translated “*worthy*” contains the concepts of moral strength and integrity.

Kathrine Kersten writes,

My grandmother’s identity grew out of a web of relationships and personal loyalties defined in part by mutual obligations and moral duties. She knew that the duties that arise from membership in a family or community are really pathways, not obstacles, to fulfillment ...

My grandmother was able to discern and carry out her duties under challenging circumstances because she made the cultivation of virtue and character the central task of her life. To her, being a “whole, independent human being” did not mean constantly taking her emotional and spiritual temperature. Rather, it meant becoming a grown up.

What does it mean to be a grown up? It means growing wise through experience and through empathy. It means being humble and admitting your mistakes. It means cultivating the very adult virtue of self-control. It means being resilient and good-humored. Being a grown up means putting others’ needs and interests before your own, when those others are dependent on you. Most of all, it means asking at all times not what is pleasant or convenient, but what is right. (*Christianity Today*, June 20, 1994, p.25)

Her husband has complete confidence in her, and he shall lack nothing of value. (Prov. 31:11)

The first part of this verse literally says, “*The heart of her husband trusts in her*” —i.e.; her husband can count on her and not be disappointed, because she is trustworthy, faithful and dependable. She proves herself to be his true friend, note Proverbs 18:24b, “*there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.*”

She does good to him and not harm, all the days of her life. (Prov. 31:12)

She is, by virtue of her integrity and commitment, a continual source of blessing and of good to her husband, not a source of harm.

A worthy woman is the crown of her husband, but she who causes him disgrace is like rotteness in his bones. (Prov. 12:4)

By her integrity she is a source of honor (“*a crown*”) to her husband. Note Proverbs 31:23, “*Her husband is respected at the city gate, when he takes his seat among the elders of the land.*” Her trustworthiness (as well as her industriousness) allows her husband to participate in his civic and religious

duties. What is described here is the same type of community service that Job carried on:

When I went to the gate of the city and took my seat in the public square... ¹⁴I put on righteousness as my clothing, and the justice I practiced was like a robe and a turban. ¹⁵I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. ¹⁶I was a father to the needy; I investigated the stranger's case. ¹⁷I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. (Job 29:7,14-17)

Furthermore, in no small measure, it is due to the noble character of his wife that the husband is recognized and respected.

Conversely, if she were to behave herself in a shameful (unfaithful) manner, she would be *"like rotteness in his bones"* (Prov. 12:4b.) Her shameful/unfaithful behavior is deeply felt by her husband. It has a devastating impact on him; his dignity is crushed, he cannot hold himself upright.

A VIRTUOUS CHARACTER INCLUDES PRUDENCE: THE ABILITY TO CAREFULLY MANAGE ONE'S LIFE AND RESOURCES.

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and assigns her maidservants their tasks. (Prov. 31:15)

She diligently watches over the affairs of her household and does not idly sit by indulging herself. (Prov. 31:27)

Houses and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from Jehovah. (Prov. 19:14)

You may receive wealth as an inheritance from your father, but a prudent wife is a special blessing from your heavenly Father.

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout, so is a beautiful woman who lacks discretion. (Prov. 11:22)

"A gold ring in a swine's snout" is painfully out of place and incongruous. A ring of gold was an elegant piece of jewelry; it is totally inappropriate and even offensive to see such a thing in a swine's snout. Likewise, it is just as offensive and incongruous to find a woman who possesses physical beauty but lacks discretion—i.e.; a woman who lacks a sense of what is right, proper, appropriate, tasteful, tactful, gracious, honorable.

Abigail, the wife of Nabal, is described as a woman who was both physically beautiful as well as a woman of discretion: *"She was an intelligent and beautiful woman"* (1 Sam. 25:3.) When she takes action to prevent David from personally taking vengeance on her self-centered, ungrateful husband, David

praises her: *“May you be blessed for your good judgment [or, discretion] and for keeping me from shedding blood this day and from avenging myself with my own hands”* (1 Sam. 25:33.)

A VIRTUOUS CHARACTER INCLUDES A QUIET SPIRIT.

A foolish son brings ruin to his father, and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. (Prov. 19:13)

“A quarrelsome wife” is one who is constantly finding fault, nagging, complaining, and arguing. Far from seeking to promote the peace and unity of the home, she is a constant source of turmoil and unrest. Such a wife is as aggravating as the continual dripping of a leaky faucet or a leaking roof in the middle of the night.

Note, too, Proverbs 21:9, *“It is better to live on the corner of a roof than in a spacious house with a quarrelsome woman.”* According to Proverbs, it is better, in the sense of being more peaceful, to live on the rooftop, even though it means being exposed to the wind and rain and cold, than to dwell with a contentious woman.

Then there is Proverbs 21:19, *“It is better to live in a desolate land than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered woman.”* It is preferable to live out in the desert under the broiling sun and among the snakes and scorpions, than to dwell with a contentious and fretful woman.

Ten proverbs deal with the subject of women, five of those ten address the problem of a contentious woman. One more such passage is Proverbs 27:15-16, *“A constant dripping on a very rainy day and a quarrelsome woman are alike; ¹⁶restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with one’s hand.”* The contentious wife may have just cause for being upset, she may have a legitimate grievance. But she unwisely resorts to contentiousness in seeking to rectify the situation—complaining, nagging, quarrelling, and doing so continuously. The consequence of her behavior: rather than having her complaint addressed and the situation corrected, she is creating a state of unrest and further alienation. Consider these biblical alternatives to contentiousness:

May [your beauty] not [merely] be the external beauty of having elaborately braided hair and wearing gold jewelry or dressing in exquisite garments; ⁴rather, may it be the inner beauty of the heart, consisting in the imperishable beauty of a humble and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. (1 Pet. 3:3-4)

But if the wife has a legitimate concern that her husband refuses to rectify, what recourse does she have? First, she may follow the procedure outlined by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17,

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)

Furthermore, she can and she should bring her cause to the LORD: *“Cast your burden upon Jehovah and he will sustain you; he will never allow the righteous to be moved”* (Psl. 55:22.)

The husband (Prov. 27:16) can no longer tolerate the contentiousness of his wife, so what course of action does he take? He seeks to restrain her—he seeks to stop her nagging and complaining, but he foolishly fails to address and alleviate the cause of her complaint. But he finds that it is impossible to restrain her. His efforts to do so are compared with trying to restrain the wind or picking up oil with your hand; he only makes matters worse, further aggravating his wife and himself. Consider these biblical ways of preventing contention or dealing with it in a godly manner when it arises:

Likewise, may the husbands live with their wives in an understanding way: showing respect to the wife as a weaker partner and as a co-heir of the grace of life. [Conduct yourselves in this way] so that your prayers are not hindered. (1 Pet. 3:7)

A contrite answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1;) that is to say, an answer that admits any wrongdoing and seeks to restore the broken relationship.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. (Col. 3:19)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (Eph. 5:25)

II. Be A Worthy Woman, by Making Your Home Your Top Priority

Consider the broad scope of this woman’s life. She is an enterprising and successful businesswoman: *“She evaluates a piece of property and purchases it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard”* (Prov. 31:16.) She is able to evaluate a piece of property, negotiate the purchase of that property, and turn the land into productive and profitable use. Proverbs 31:11 declares, *“her husband has*

complete confidence in her." One dimension of that trust is his confidence in his wife's abilities; note, further, Proverbs 31:24, "*She makes linen garments and sells them, and she supplies the merchants with sashes.*" She is engaged in a profitable garment making business; confidently dealing with the buying public and with businessmen, providing a high quality product (linen garments.)

Then, too, she is actively involved in a ministry of charity in the community: "*She opens her arms to the poor; indeed, she extends her hands to the needy*" (Prov. 31:20.) She is complying with the command of Deuteronomy 15:11, "*I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.*"

But now consider, also, the focus of this woman's life: she makes her home her top priority. She carries on all her business activities on behalf of her family, not at the expense of her family:

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and assigns her maidservants their tasks. (Prov. 31:15)

When it snows, she has no fear for her household, for all of them are clothed in scarlet. (Prov. 31:21)

She diligently watches over the affairs of her household and does not idly sit by indulging herself. (Prov. 31:27)

*Her husband has complete confidence in her, and he shall lack nothing of value.
¹²She does him good and not harm, all the days of her life.* (Prov. 31:11-12)

In this regard, consider the counsel of Proverbs 14:1, "*Every wise woman builds up her house, but a foolish woman tears hers down with her own hands.*" A wise woman invests her energies in the building up of her home and family. All her activities, however diverse and far reaching, contribute to the well being of her home; they are not undertaken at the expense of her home or as a substitute for her home.

In contrast to the wise woman, "*a foolish woman tears hers down with her own hands.*" Would you ever pick up an axe and start hacking your own house to pieces? If your top priority is not your home and family, if your energy and attention is found to be focused somewhere other than your home, you are tearing it down. Beware of this fact, even when your attention and energy may be focused on "a worthy cause:" The famous baseball player, Ted Williams, suffered neglect as a child because his mother devoted all her time and energy to the worthy cause of the local Salvation Army, but failed to attend to her own home and family. Bear in mind the admonition of 1 Corinthians 7:34,

... the woman who is not married and the virgin care about the things of the Lord, such a woman's concern is to be holy both in body and in spirit. But the married woman must be concerned about the things of the world, how she can please her husband. (1 Cor. 7:34)

III. Be A Worthy Woman, Who is Truly Deserving of Praise

"Charm is deceptive" (Prov. 31:30a.) A woman may be charming and thus attract men to herself. But if there is nothing of godly substance below the surface of her charm, then that charm is deceitful; it is an alluring package, but disappointingly, there is no substantial content. *"Beauty is fleeting"* (Prov. 31:30b.) Mere outward beauty, all by itself without the accompaniment of the beauty of a godly character, is empty, it is lacking in lasting, spiritually nourishing substance.

But *"a woman who fears Jehovah—one whose life is governed by a holy reverence for the LORD her God—she shall be praised"* (Prov. 31:30c.) She should be praised by her children: *"Her children stand up and call her blessed"* (Prov. 31:28a.) She should be praised by her husband: *"her husband ... praises her, saying, ²⁹Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all!"* (Prov. 31:28b-29.) She should be praised by the church: *"let her works bring her praise at the city gate"* (Prov. 31:31b;) the godly woman receives public praise among the people of God. She will be honored by the LORD her God:

May [your beauty] not [merely] be the external beauty of having elaborately braided hair and wearing gold jewelry or dressing in exquisite garments; ⁴rather, may it be the inner beauty of the heart, consisting in the imperishable beauty of a humble and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. (1 Pet. 3:3-4)

Conclusion

Kathrine Kersten speaks of her great grandmother and her grandmother in the following terms:

My great grandmother ... was widowed at a young age. After her husband died, she took her eight children to Colorado and homesteaded there as a single mother. She nursed four children who died before the age of 18. She worked hard, night and day, battling the elements to insure that the children who survived would become honorable and productive citizens. In similar fashion, my grandmother raised five children almost single-handedly during the Depression. She started a business and drove her Model T 30,000 miles across the country to establish a chain of distributors. With the money she earned, she helped to send her children to college.

What made it possible for my grandmother and great grandmother to accomplish so much? ...They knew who they were, why they were here, and what they had to do. They had well-considered ideas about what the good life is, and they had the internal resources of virtue and character necessary to live that life. They were strong women, like the industrious woman of “noble character” praised in Proverbs 31. (*Christianity Today*, June 20, 1994, p.22)

In reliance upon the grace of Christ our Savior, may our Christian sisters strive to become the type of worthy woman described in the Book of Proverbs: 1) one who develops a virtuous character; 2) one who makes her home her top priority; and 3) one who is truly deserving of praise. May we, as Christian brothers and husbands, pray for and help our sisters successfully undertake this spiritually worthy endeavor.