

Dating, Sex, Marriage
RUF, Fall 2012

A Woman's Dignity: Work, Laughter, and Character

Proverbs 31:10-31

"'You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve,' said Aslan. 'And that is both honour enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor in earth.'" (C. S. Lewis)

Scripture Introduction

Last week we talked about masculinity. This week, it's femininity. An obvious confession: I'm no expert. I do, however, have a female roommate, for what it's worth. And after 10 years she has confirmed that I am still no expert.

The Bible in Genesis 1 tells us that both men and women were created *in the image of God*. We were created in God's image to rule over His creation, to be good kings and queens of the world. And so, both men and women have equally high and noble callings. There is no difference in the quality of our dignity. Our question tonight, though, is this: What does that mean specifically for a woman? What does it mean specifically to be a **woman after the image of God**?

The reason I frame the question like that is because the issue of image is a big deal for us. It is a huge consideration for young women.

Listen to this testimony from a girl named Laurie. Laurie is a sophomore in college. She is from an upper-middle-class home in Dallas. She was interviewed for a study just down the road at the University of Texas:

"I daily feel pressured to conform to **a certain image**. As a young woman, I am expected to be beautiful, thin, poised, elegant, respectful, educated, fashionable, and mature. I should wear certain clothes, shoes, and makeup. I also feel expected to know the latest fashion trends, gossip, and celebrity news. In respect to men and dating, I must be fun, flirty, sexy, and exciting. These expectations and pressures are reinforced through magazines, television, movies, and friends.... Together these structures mold **the image of the perfect young woman** and demand all to conform. Although I am aware of this superficial marketing technique, I still desire to look like the models in magazines and the celebrities in movies. I realize that men are attracted to numerous qualities in women, **but I want most to be beautiful and sexy.**"¹

Laurie's testimony is revealing: She feels pressure to conform to **a certain image** of thinness and charm and sexiness.

I want you to notice something at the beginning of our time tonight: Both Laurie's testimony and the Bible suggest that **there is an image**. There is an icon by which to

¹ Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*.

measure and affirm female dignity and self-worth. There are qualities to be celebrated and praised in a woman.

The problem, however, is that those images don't agree. They're not even close. Even worse, according to Proverbs 31, the image described by Laurie, the image in which a woman is valued according to her charisma and sex appeal – that image is judged as destructive and foolish. In other words, the image that Laurie feels pressured to conform to right now, the image that you feel pressured to conform to right now, that image is nothing new. It's been around since the beginning, and over 2,500 years ago the wisdom of Proverbs looked at that image and said – “Ladies, you were made for something better. Come with me instead.”

Let's read that ancient passage now, in hopes that grace will have its way with us.

Scripture Reading

An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and portions for her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes bed coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers sashes to the merchant. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

Prayer

Work

Many in our culture live under the assumption that the Bible is socially backwards, that it is regressive and does more harm than good when it comes to the dignity of women.

We certainly don't have time to answer that criticism fully tonight, but I do want to touch on this question:

Does the Bible constrict women? Does it impose limits on them?

- (1) Yes. The Bible does limit women. But no more than it does men. In Christianity, everyone is limited by God's design and God's love.

For example, the Bible limits a man's sexuality. It prescribes sex within marriage – do you think men would have chosen that? The Bible limits how a man earns and spends his money. It limits his authority. It severely limits his self-interest.

Limits are simply a part of what it means to follow Jesus. In Christianity, every part of your life is limited by your discipleship. You should expect that.

But here's how Christianity views those limits: If God says "No" to something, it's because He's saying "Yes" to something else. For example, God's "No" to drunkenness is a "Yes" to wisdom and self-control. His "No" to gossip is a "Yes" to relational integrity. His "No" to self-righteousness is a "Yes" to humility and compassion. If you're ever confused about the "No" in Scripture when it comes to limits, look for the "Yes" that goes with it. The "No's" often make more sense beside the "Yes's".

- (2) The Bible is much more progressive than you probably think, especially when it comes to women. Of all the followers of Jesus, women understand him the quickest and stay with him the longest. Women remain with Jesus at the Cross, while men like Peter have abandoned him. Women are the first to arrive at the empty tomb. Women are the first to announce the Resurrection. In the Bible, women are never simply in the background as the men do the real work. Women are leaders.

Speaking of leaders, I want you to consider how limited you think this woman in Proverbs 31 is. Consider her work, all that she's involved in:

- (1) In verses 13-15, she manages her household affairs – the clothes, the food, the servants.
- (2) In verse 16, she negotiates and purchases real estate.
- (3) In verse 17, she's commended for her physical strength – probably Pilates or Zumba.
- (4) In verse 18, she measures and plans for economic stability.
- (5) In verse 20, she's praised for her philanthropy. She cares for the poor.
- (6) In verse 21, she makes preparations for the uncertainties of the future.
- (7) In verse 22, she treasures beauty and clothes herself in style: Tory Burch, I'm sure.
- (8) In verse 24, she has another business she's running (what's a couple extra side businesses, right?).
- (9) In verse 25, she's carefree enough to laugh (we'll come back to this).
- (10) In verse 26, she's esteemed for her ability to teach and counsel and to say the right things in the right moments in the right ways.

Ladies, what do you think of this woman? Do you find her limited?

I'm guessing it's just the opposite. You don't look at her and feel oppressed. You look at her and feel overwhelmed. Secretly, you probably hate her because, well, she's kind of a show-off. She's too good.

But this is a picture of what it looks like to be created female in the image of God. Ladies, you were made for all kinds of impressive possibilities, all kinds of work, all kinds of influence.

There really aren't any limits here in this passage, but you'll run into some in other parts of the Bible. And so, here's what we can say, and this applies to men and women alike.

We all have to be humble enough to trust God with our limits. But you also have to be noble enough, magnanimous enough, to trust God with your possibilities, believing that God has designed you, that He's called you to pursue greatness. If you hear a "No" in Scripture in one area, it's not an indictment of your ability. It's a clue that the dignity of your calling actually lies elsewhere.

Now, part of me reads this passage about all that this woman does, and I think to myself, "Why does a girl at SMU need to hear this???" This is you! 3 majors, and 12 minors. 9 weekly organizational meetings. Presidents of really important stuff. Dancers and athletes and babysitters and small business owners. You all took the whole involvement spiel at Mustang Corral very seriously.

So, it begs the question: Is our Proverbs 31 woman just an ancient image of ourselves? If she were walking around our campus today, would she be any different than anyone else?

I think she would. Maybe not on her resume, but I think she would be significantly different in person, and verse 25 tells us why:

"Strength and dignity are her clothing, *and she laughs at the time to come.*"

Laughter

Think about that.

When this woman looks at the future:

- sorority rush;
- the uncertainties of relationships;
- the thought of graduation;
- the possibility of never finding the right guy or landing the right job...

... when she considers all her looming fears, all the impending disappointments, her stomach doesn't tie itself in knots. She doesn't throw back a couple shots to take her mind off everything. She doesn't naively giggle and wave her hand in the air and think to herself, "Tomorrow will somehow take care of itself."

No. She glares down the corridor of her life – all the uncertainties, all the fears, all the disappointments – and she mocks them. She says to them, "Really? Is that all you got? Is that all you can do to me?" And she laughs as if the future is a child threatening her with a Nerf gun.

I don't know that many of us confront our future like this.

If we laugh at all, it's because we've distracted or inebriated ourselves so that the future is totally out of our vision for a moment. We usually have to turn our faces away from the days to come in order to laugh.

And so, how does she do it? How could live with such lightheartedness about the future.

Well, I'll give you a hint. The answer is not in the verses preceding this one. Hard work, even noble work, can only prepare you for the future. It can't make you laugh at it.

The answer is found in an ensuing verse, verse 30. And herein lies the key to this woman's dignity:

"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

Character

This verse is the wellspring verse in the passage. It animates all the other verses.

And here's what it says. Remember the pressure that Laurie felt to conform to the image of charisma and beauty – that image will actually diminish you as a woman. It won't give you life; instead, it will steal it away.

And you say, "Chad, that's great. I'm all for it. I believe that character matters. I believe that character in a woman matters way more than outward appearance. But, why should I care about my character when nobody else in the world does?"²

It's a great question. And a sad one. And it reveals the poison in our culture: how we overvalue beauty, and what that does to diminish us both as women and men.

It's why the rate of eating disorders is 3-5 times higher among women in industrialized nations than poor nations, and it's twice as high among college-educated women than non-college educated women. As Tim Keller, a pastor in Manhattan observes, "what this seems to mean is, the closer you get to the heart of western civilization, the closer you get to the heart of western culture; the more successful you are... the closer you get to Los Angeles, and New York, and London, and Paris" and we could add, places like Dallas and SMU; "...the more women are bombarded with a sense that they're fat and ugly almost no matter who they are!"

But the poison not only diminishes women. It diminishes the dignity of men as well.

How so?

First, as I mentioned last week, our addiction to pornography. I read the statistics

² Tim Keller, "The Temptation of Beauty." A good portion of my conclusion comes directly from Keller's sermon.

last week. They're overwhelming. We've traded in real relationships with real, complicated women for the ease of false intimacy with women we never have to talk to. That diminishes us.

But Keller mentions a second way in which our addiction to (outward appearance) hurts the dignity of men, and that is the way in which we as guys determine who we're going to date and love and marry. What we do is we go by 80% of the women (Seinfeld said, 95% of the world was undateable), and we don't even think about them. They're just not pretty enough. We walk right by them. We don't even consider their character. So, we've narrowed it down to about 20% of the women, or maybe fewer, that we think are pretty enough to consider, and then we talk to some of them and find that they're shallow... they're way to into their looks or charisma, and we say things like:

"Oh, I'm not interested in her, she's shallow."

She's shallow? Really!?

You've just walked past 80% of the women in the world based solely on how they look. And you're saying, "I've rejected her because she's shallow. I want someone who's beautiful AND deep."

Well here's the problem, guys: we're not deep. Our own character and vision is flawed. There are all kinds of people who would be wonderful dates and wonderful friends and wonderful potential mates for you, and you won't even think about them. And this is creating serious isolation and fear among us. It's why there's so much pressure on dating in the first place.

We've way overvalued appearance, and way undervalued character. And it diminished both genders.

So, the question becomes, "Why?" Why are we so obsessed with outward appearance and charm? (Our clichés suggest we know better: "It's what's on the inside that counts.")

I think Keller hits the nail on the head:

It's because we don't like who we are on the inside.

We have a sense that if people really knew us, then they wouldn't really love us. There's a shame we carry around with us that says, "There's something wrong with me. I can't be loved for who I am." But, if I can look really great on the outside, or if I can be with someone who looks great on the outside, then that feels as if the ugliness on the inside has been covered up.

And that's exactly what the Bible tells us. Genesis 3 says the minute we experienced alienation from God, the minute we experienced a sense of shame, we had to cover ourselves up. We ran for fig leaves. We needed something to cover that sense of nakedness and vulnerability that we felt. We needed cosmetics. We needed fashion: Tory Burch and David Yurman and Louis Vitton and Lulu Lemon. We needed beauty.

But until we are radically sure that we are loved and lovable, we are never going to be

free from the desperate need to be with or to be beautiful. We will always be bound by the scale. We will always be enslaved to our mirrors. And how could we ever look at the days to come and laugh, if what awaits us in the days to come is the horror of wrinkled skin, and sagging flesh, and finally, our own deaths?

That's why Genesis 3 doesn't end with Adam and Eve living happily ever after and skipping around in their fig leaves. It ends with God taking off the coverings that they have made for themselves, so that he can clothe them instead with his provision, his sacrifice. God provides the way for human shame to be covered once-and-for-all. And that culminates in the story of Jesus. Jesus, the beauty of God's character, the beauty of God's righteousness, is given to cover your nakedness. In Jesus, God radically assures you that He looks at you tonight and loves you, that He has made you lovable in the core of your being, so much so, that you no longer have to entrust yourself to cosmetic surgeons or dieticians or the glances of men.

But even more than that, the Bible says that in Christ, God not only loves you deeply, but He loves you "unendingly." He loves you with a steadfast love that never gets interrupted, a love that lasts forever. And the only way that can happen, the only way that the love of God can be worn by you forever, is that God makes you last forever. Do you see that? In Christ, God destroys the enslavement of outward appearance, not only by covering your sense of unworthiness, but by conquering death so that you can wear the beauty of his character forever.

And that's why you can laugh tonight. That's why a woman "who fears the Lord" can look at the days to come, and laugh –because whatever else may be there, the love of God has clothed her with a dignity that outlasts them all. And that is the well from which she draws her confidence, her life.

Conclusion

There was a small independent film that came out a few years ago whose featured protagonist was a man named Bernie. Bernie is a lonely man. He's endured a life of bad luck. His luck is so bad that a casino has hired him to be their "cooler." When a blackjack or craps table gets hot, Bernie just hangs around until his bad luck changes things. But then he meets and falls in love with a woman named Natalie, and his life and luck start to change. In fact, their relationship progresses pretty smoothly until Natalie's past catches up with her one night. Bernie comes home to find that Natalie has been physically assaulted by some thugs, and, in her struggle to fight them off, has suffered some cuts and bruises to her face. And so, without hesitation, Bernie helps Natalie to the car and they drive to the nearby hospital.

The next scene shows Bernie and Natalie in the car, and Natalie is obviously very distraught. To get a glimpse of herself, she pulls down the mirror fastened to the visor above her seat, and absolutely cringes when she sees how ugly she has become in the mirror – the blood, the distorted flesh, to potential scarring. Bernie notices her reaction out of the corner of his eye, slows down the car, grabs her arm, and makes her look at him. Natalie just keeps repeating, "I'm too embarrassed." But Bernie is vigilant and finally quiets her down enough to say this: "Look at me. Look into my eyes. I want you to know something. My eyes are the only mirror you'll ever need."

What is Bernie telling Natalie?

He saying, “Don’t draw your confidence from what you see when you look in the mirror. Draw your confidence from the pleasure you see in my eyes when I look at you.”

That’s what the wise woman of Proverbs 31 has found. She has found the only mirror she really needs is mirror of God’s pleasure in beholding her, the mirror of God’s delight in loving her, created and redeemed, after his own image.

Ladies, this week, I want you to laugh. I’m serious. I want you to think about your future, what normally makes you nervous, and fearful, and insecure, and I want you to laugh in the face of it. Mock it. And when you get in front of a mirror this week, and you find yourself obsessing about how you look, or hating your body, or enthralled with your body for that matter, I want you to laugh. Even if it feels awkward, I want you to laugh. Not because you want to, but because you need to. I want you to make yourself laugh, in order to remember that whatever else may be in front of you, whatever else may be measuring you, God has clothed you with a dignity that will outlast them all. And that love is the image that you are called to bear confidently as a woman.

So says Wisdom.