

What a Woman!
Proverbs 31: 10-31

Well friends it's mother's day. So I would like to read a poem for you – maybe you've heard it before or something like it.

M-O-T-H-E-R

M- is for the million things she gave me,
O - means only that she's growing old,
T - is for the tears she shed to save me,
H - is for her heart of purest gold;
E - is for her eyes, with love-light shining,
R - means right, and right she'll always be,

Put them all together, they spell "MOTHER,"
A word that means the world to me.

Howard Johnson (c. 1915)

Isn't that nice! When I read it I was reminded of all the times I have gone shopping for cards on Mother's day, trying to find just the right sentiment expressed inside that fit the relationship I had with my Mom.

It wasn't always easy; in fact I usually ended up writing my own cards

and if I had written an acrostic poem it might go something like this

M – is for the million times she told me to behave
O – is for being sent Outside after teasing my sisters
T – Is for time she spent with me and my homework
H – Is for homework again
E – Is for effort required to motivate me
R – Are the results which finally occurred – and I turned out Ok.

Thanks Mom

Friends, does this ever happen to you? Do you find that the reality of your relationship with your mothers doesn't seem to quite match up with the idealism expressed by Hallmark or Shoppers Drug Mart? Do you ever experience that tension? So just keep that thought in the back of your mind for a moment.

Now Mother's day is not a Christian holiday per say – it doesn't have a biblical precedent like Christmas, or Easter, or other holidays in the church year, however that doesn't mean that the spirit of honoring our mothers, or women in general doesn't occur in the scriptures.

In fact we might remember that the 10 commandments tell us to “honor your father *and mother*”

And women and motherhood certainly play a central role in the overall story of scripture as God brings redemption to our world.

And if you remember last week we learned that God is the Father... primarily in the sense that He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and of course that means he had a mother – who was Mary.

So, how appropriate then that we celebrate motherhood – the means by which the Word of God became flesh and lived among us.

And the whole idea of writing poetry to praise your mom, or your wife, or to describe the ideal women or mother like Hallmark does, is not a foreign concept to scriptures either.

In fact the passage we read this morning is an acrostic poem which does exactly that.

Each verse of this poem begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet; it's the A-Z on what the ideal woman would look like, the total package as it were. So this poem gives us a comprehensive description of what the bible says being a woman is all about.

Now, remember that tension I asked you to think about earlier, about the reality of your relationship with your mom and the idealism expressed in the Hallmark cards?

Well here too, as we read this scripture there is some tension, right? We have the ideal expressed in this poem... and then there's reality that most of us live with.

Now maybe as you listened to the scripture passage being read this morning you were thinking “Who is this woman?” She's like Martha Stewart on steroids! I can't do all that!

Or perhaps you were mentally ticking of the list.

- *gets up early*: I do that,

- *Her arms are strong*: good I've been working out

- *Speaks with wisdom*: not bad, maybe I need to work on that one. I could probably fit a class on being wise if I just rearrange my schedule a bit...

Friends, it's easy to read this passage of scripture and come away feeling either a bit guilty or a bit proud, because we're either doing well or not so well in measuring up to the standard that is put before us.

Friends the good news is that no matter how far we are from measuring up, or in spite of our pride because we think we do, Christ has mercy on us and forgives us.

And if indeed all scripture points us to Christ, then this passage too should be a source of mercy, and grace and encouragement for women, not a source of pride or pity, especially as we are looking at it to celebrate Mothers' day.

So how does a poem which seems to hold up an unrealistic ideal for women actually function as a source of grace and mercy, and encouragement? Let's find out, and to help us

remember what we discover we're going to use "W.O.M.A.N" as an acrostic. Isn't that clever☺

W – Wisdom

W stands for wisdom because this poem is found in the book of Proverbs. And Proverbs is part of the wisdom writings of the bible.

Now among the different kinds of literature that make up the bible – narrative, law, prophecy, gospel, etc... wisdom writings are concerned with what it takes to live skillfully in God's world.

Friends, remember Wisdom is different from Law. And this means that this passage is not a set of commands for women which God expects them to keep. Nowhere does it say "thou shalt..." so you can relax☺

But if it's not a set of commands, what exactly is wisdom and how does it speak to us?

Well just like the French have “Lady Revolution” and the Americans have “Lady Liberty” and the justice system has “Lady Justice” to embody the ideals they represent...

The bible has “Lady Wisdom” - Sophia, and this poem is her picture, her statue as it were. This poem embodies all that it means to live skillfully in God’s world.

And while these are not commands, living skillfully, cooperatively with the way God has created things to work, shows that you acknowledge God as creator, respect His will and submit to His authority, in other words you have a proper relationship with God, the Father, Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth.

And the portrait of Lady Wisdom given to us in this poem reminds us of all this in a beautiful, artistic way.

Now what this poem says to Mothers... is that as parents their primary calling is to raise us to be wise. To teach us who and whose we are and what it means to live skillfully in God’s world... and also to teach us the scriptures so that as 2 Timothy

3:15 says – you can be wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Mothers, and those who eventually will be mothers - you play such an important role in helping children begin to come to faith in Christ!

- By reading Bible stories to them when you put them to bed,
- Teaching them how to pray to Jesus,
- Bringing them to church regularly,
- Modeling in your own life the fear of the Lord and
- Letting them see your own devotion and passion to serve Jesus Christ.

Mothers, and fathers... please note – faith development is different from moral development. I know how tempting it is to just focus on teaching morals to our children, esp. so that they behave better! It makes our job easier and less worrisome doesn’t it?

But our first responsibility is to teach them to be wise, wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and the morals will follow.

However it's not as easy, it's not as immediate, but the results last for an eternal life time.

And mothers... just like Lady Wisdom, who has the last word in the book of Proverbs; you often have the last word in our lives as well. So use that position and influence to ensure that we are wise for salvation and know how to put our faith in Jesus Christ.

My mother always used to say to me as I left the house to hang out with my friends – Grant, remember you are a Christian!

1 Timothy 1:5 - I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

O – Oprah Principle

O stands for Oprah. To many women today Oprah is the epitome of what a woman can achieve. She has overcome the barriers of gender and race to become a wealthy, influential, role model for millions of women around the world.

Ladies, mothers, the scriptures want Lady Wisdom to be that kind of inspiration and mentor for you. Let Lady Wisdom be your Oprah!

Lady Wisdom is not a poor, kept woman, she is a wealthy, noblewoman and she uses her skills and resources to affect the lives of many around her in positive, helpful ways.

- Her husband's reputation is enhanced by her
- She employs servants – gives people jobs
- She is a business supplier of quality goods
- Her family is well provided for, food, clothes etc..
- She has resources to share with the poor
- She shares her insights on life to teach others

What a woman! Lady Wisdom certainly blows any gender stereotypes out of the water! What a woman to model your

life after, you don't have to settle for mediocrity, or sacrificing your dreams or stifling your gifts! (vs. 29) *Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.*

But, ladies neither do you need to feel intimidated by her level of success if your goals are more modest.

Why do her achievements surpass those of other women? Not because she's faster, smarter, richer or more powerful. It's because she is motivated by the desire to bless others; she is not driven to prove anything to herself or to others.

And in this she serves God, plain and simple - there is no other agenda.

Mothers whatever level of education, career, or success you have achieved in life let your children see that you do it because you want to bless others and serve God in doing so and it will be said of you as well...

Many women do noble things but you surpass them all!

Colossians 3:17 - *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

M – Married

M stands for Married. Friends it may surprise you to discover that Lady Wisdom is married.

That's because it's hard to imagine someone in our society today who achieves a very high level of success in their career and still remains married, and happily so. In fact it often seems that people are forced to choose between marriage and career.

But Lady Wisdom is married and happily so. *Vs. 12 She brings her husband good not harm, all the days of his life.* For her it is not an either/or choice, but both/and!

Now remember – this is wisdom literature, so this is not a command saying, thou shalt be married by age 30 and have 2.5 kids and a dog. So if you're not married – relax, there's no pressure.

But it does reflect an understanding, a belief, a conviction that marriage, and family are God's intended design for human relationships and that we ought to take that seriously and respect it...

And, if we follow the rules by which God has designed relationships and marriage to operate by – if we are skillful in doing so, then we can have both a fulfilling career and a healthy family life. We do not have to sacrifice one for the other.

Mathew 19: 4-6 *"Haven't you read," Jesus replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let others not separate."*

A – Attractiveness

A is for Attractiveness, but not the kind of attractiveness that we may be used to, because nowhere is this picture of Lady

Wisdom do you find her being praised for her looks or her outward beauty.

This is not to say that such things aren't important, in fact its hard to imagine someone who values God's good creation, but does not take care of their body or how they present themselves.

However, in every age and every civilization it has been common for women to become reduced to objects prized for their outward beauty *alone*.

But Lady Wisdom is not someone who buys into this. *Vs. 30 Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*

Instead it is the skillful way that she goes about living according to the way God created life to operate, in all the areas of her life that makes Lady Wisdom attractive and winsome.

Friends, Hollywood may have some of the most glamorous and beautiful starlets around – in fact over the last 10 years we’ve watched a number of them grow up. Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, The Olsen Twins, just to name a few.

However, after observing the “skill” with which they live their lives, very few of us would conclude that the train wrecks which they’ve made of themselves are truly attractive, no matter how glamorous they can to make themselves look with fashion and make-up.

Instead, women and mothers, whose lives are inspired by Lady Wisdom, who embody the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ both for others and themselves - truly set the standard of what is attractive and beautiful a way that certainly includes, but goes far beyond looks.

1 Peter 3:3-4³ *Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes.* ⁴ *Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.*

N – Noticed

Finally N, for Noticed, and friends this is the reason why we have Mothers’ Day. *Vs. 31 Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.*

Being a woman, being a mother, is not easy. I can only speak from my limited experience as a son and a husband.... and from what I’ve observed I can say this:

There’s been a lot of discrimination and abuse

You frequently wrestle with guilt

You worry constantly about your kids

It’s hard to feel good about your body

You resent always having to sacrifice

And last but not least...

You have to try and understand MEN!

So ladies, mothers, we want to recognize and notice and encourage you. We want to say well done for all the ways in which you have strived to live skillfully in your lives.

From bringing us up in the faith, modeling a life which blesses others, being faithful in marriage, and showing how attractive this can all be- for this you deserve to be noticed, congratulated and encouraged. So I say “Well Done!”

But I also say you need to be encouraged. Because all of us know we have our faults and flaws, and so do the women and mothers among us.

Andy Lady Wisdom would also not agree with a saccharine sentimentality which pretends that we are all perfect.

And I’m sure that as we’ve looked at the portrait of Lady Wisdom and all that she represents – that it has raised awareness for us of areas where we are not wise, where we have failed, where we do not acknowledge God’s rules and ways.

Perhaps we’ve prized morality over faith in our children, maybe we have strived to get ahead to prove something to the world, maybe we have selfishly pursued our career at the expense of a relationship, maybe we’ve bought into the ideal of glamour as true beauty....

So ladies, mothers – all of us really... Today, as much as you need praise, you also need to be reminded that God’s grace and mercy are there for you as well.

So be encouraged with these words from scripture

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Philippians 1:6 - Be confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus

This is the good news, hear it, believe it, trust in it – and turn to it whenever you need it.

So Women, Mothers – Well done! Be Encouraged – Happy Mothers Day.

Amen.