

## Proverbs and Marriage

### Proverbs 31:10-31

For the last two weeks we've looked at what Proverbs has to say about money and how we so need wisdom in how we handle it. And if wisdom is learning to negotiate our way through life with skill, then over the next 3 Sundays we're going to look at another area where we sure need that and that is the whole area of marriage and family and sex. This week we're going to see what Proverbs has to say about marriage. Next week Tom is going to tackle sex, and the week after Johan is going to show us what this book has to say about children and family. So it's going to be a great 3 weeks!

When it comes to romantic relationships you need wisdom from the start: should you date this guy? Should you marry this woman? I mean she's got a great figure, but her moods drive me mad – is that going to be a problem? Or I really love him, but he never expresses his love for me, should that bother me? Or within a marriage and conflict is coming up, how do you diffuse that, is there a way of relating to one another that breaks this cycle of arguing and bickering? And for a thousand other questions about marriage does Proverbs have any guidance to offer? Well, the amazing thing is, considering it was written 3000 years ago is it does and it is wonderfully helpful and insightful.

Now the danger with any talk on marriage is that if you're single you tune out. Don't do that. Remember, Proverbs was written by Solomon for his sons on the verge of adulthood. It's been written for singles, and so it has everything to do with you, and for those of us who are married as well.

#### **God's gift**

If you read Proverbs it's not long before you start hearing Solomon warning his sons not to fall for the adulterous woman and her sexual charms. And in one of his first warnings Solomon, as if in passing, spells out the biblical basis of marriage. It's class 101 on Marriage: Proverbs 2:16-17 'So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.' Don't go near her, he says, she has broken her covenant with her husband and with her God. And that is what marriage is. It's a covenant, a life-long covenant between a man and a woman in the sight of God.

It's not a contract. A contract says, it's for this long and you can get out after 1, 3 or 5 years and if the other party doesn't fulfill their part of the contract, you're ok to break it. No, marriage, the Bible says, is a life-long covenant. And that's one of the reasons why divorce can be so devastating to those who go through it, and some of you have experienced that. It's why these pre-nuptial contracts are so bizarre, it's like working out your divorce before your marriage. And within that covenant Proverbs tells us men in particular, that your wife is God's gift to you.

Right back at the beginning of creation, even before man's relationship with God was spoiled by sin, even whilst man lived in this perfect relationship with God, Genesis 2:18 records God as saying 'It is not good that the man should be alone.' So God provided him with a helper fit for him, a wonderful wife by his side. And Proverbs takes up that idea of the wife as God's precious gift to a man and unwraps it: Proverbs 19:14 'House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a

prudent wife is *from the Lord.* Now a prudent wife doesn't sound very sexy does it? Not the sort of thing that usually turns a man on, but Proverbs says that sort of wife *especially* is a gift from God. She's wise with common sense understanding. The fact that she wants to keep tabs on your house-hold finances isn't a pain, it's prudence.

You've probably seen or read that book 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' and there have probably been times men when you've wondered 'what planet is she from?' Well, Proverbs says a good wife doesn't come from any planet, she comes from heaven, she is heaven sent into your life. 'Look' it says 'your parents might be able to hand on a good financial inheritance to you, but they can't provide you with a wife like that, she is God's gracious gift to you'. And Proverbs 18:22 says 'he who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord.' So not only is she God's one-off gift, she is God's on-going favour on your life.

And so Solomon tells us men that we need to see her like that throughout her life. Talking about a man delighting in his wife sexually Solomon says in Proverbs 5:18-19 'Rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe... be intoxicated always in her love.' Now ladies it might interest you to know that the word Solomon uses there for doe is not doe at all, but the word for a mountain goat. However for some strange reason, the translators clearly think that it's not acceptable to compare your wife to a goat! But the point Solomon is making is just like you admire the grace and beauty and elegance of a deer, see that beauty in your wife.

And he says 'rejoice in the wife of your youth'. This is a covenant for life, so, as she ages your love and delight in her just grows and matures with her. You don't just delight in what she was, but what she is now; you don't delight in what she isn't but what she is. That is covenant faithfulness: one wife for life and that grows rather than diminishes with time. But you've got to choose to do that.

Men, let me ask you, is that the way you see her? I want to encourage you to fight with your thinking, fight through the stupor that settles on your minds to see her that way, that she is God's grace and favour to you.

But ladies, it's not all one way. If a husband is to see his wife as a gift from God Proverbs also talks about two different sorts of wives and they differ according to how they think of and treat their husbands. Proverbs 12:4 says 'An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.' So not every wife brings joy and pleasure to her husband. There is a wife who eats away at her husband like a cancer eating away at his body. She's a wife who brings shame, you've probably met one, you hear her putting her husband down, she criticizes him in front of their friends, she undermines him in front of the kids, she flirts with other men. And the effect of such a wife, Proverbs says, is like cancer in his bones.

But the other sort of wife is called excellent and she is like a crown on her husband's head. She's not a doormat, she's not a scullery maid, she's not even a

trophy wife on the arm, she's a crown on the head. You see a trophy wife is all about her external beauty. The wife who is as a crown is all about her character, and her character is the exact opposite of the one who brings shame, she brings her husband praise. She radiates something and her husband basks in the radiated glow of her character as she speaks of him and treats him like a king and she gets to bask in his glow as he treats her like his queen. They shine in this mutual glorying in one another in marriage. An excellent wife is the crown of her husband.

Ladies, let me ask you, which of those do you aspire to be like?

You see there is a reason why this mutual delight in one another is there, and that's because marriage is not just about the two of you. When you get to the New Testament you discover a whole new dimension to marriage and that's that marriage has been created by God to set forth a picture of Christ and the church, of Christ's covenant relationship with His church. Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 5: 'Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.'

So what Paul says is that the mystery of marriage is not how amazing it is that the two of you can get on and live under the same roof. The mystery of marriage is that God uses it to paint a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. That a husband should love his wife like Christ loves the church, and the wife should glory in her husband, submit to him, honour him, as the church glories in Christ. That's the mystery of marriage. That together we get to paint a picture for all the world to see, of the gospel, of Christ laying down his life for the church in self-sacrificial love and of the church honouring and submitting to and glorying in Christ.

And Proverbs, written 1000 years before Christ, sees that, just in shadowy outline, but it sees it as it tells us husbands, she's God's gracious gift to you, so treat her like that and wives, you are to be the crown on his head by honouring him.

But what about when it all goes wrong?

### **Your Worst Nightmare - when it goes wrong**

Marriage is not always so great and some of you have first hand experience of that either with your parents, like me, or within your own marriage. Well, one area where Proverbs is really honest about is the destructive power of bickering

and arguing within a marriage. Proverbs 19:13 'a foolish son is ruin to his father, and a wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain.' When quarrelling sets in, it's like domestic Chinese water torture. And the effect on home life is dire: Proverbs 21:9 'It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.' Bickering in a marriage creates an emotional prison. It's like bars and locks on your soul and in comparison living on the corner of a roof-top seems like freedom. Or Proverbs 21:19 'It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman.' Why? Because quarrelling is emotionally exhausting, it saps strength out of your husband or wife and out of your marriage. In comparison a desert looks like a well-watered oasis. You get more refreshment in a desert than in a marriage where they go at each other like hammer and tongs.

Some friends of ours had some guests to stay recently and they said that the husband and wife just bickered the whole time they were with them. And when they were alone the wife would constantly put the husband down. My friend told me they were glad to see them go. Their departure date couldn't come soon enough.

Now ladies, these Proverbs, and there are others we could have looked at, are all directed at wives. That's not because this book is misogynistic or chauvinistic, it's because the primary audience for this book was young men and they're being urged to choose their wives carefully: she might have a great body, but is she going to make your life a nightmare? But these Proverbs are also uncomfortably true, and as one of the ladies in our home group said this week, the truth is you can make a choice whether you are going to be that wife or not. It doesn't mean you can't disagree with him or bring your opinion. You can, you must at times if you are to be his wise, godly, prudent helper, but don't be the quarrelsome wife of Proverbs. Because if you are, he will withdraw and tune out.

But men, ask yourself, if you're in this situation, why is she quarrelling? Why has this pattern got established? Sure there are some who may be argumentative by nature, but ask yourself is there stuff you're doing or not doing, or areas you need to give attention to that could go a long way to giving her the security or peace she needs. Proverbs 27:8 says 'like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home'. Now, what happens when a bird strays from its nest? It leaves it undefended. The eggs, the chicks are left to fend for themselves, and that's what happens if a husband or a dad strays from home. And you can wander off physically or emotionally. It might be because of work which consumes your hours. It might be your hobbies that draw you away. It could be your so-called friends and they're pulling you over here. Whatever it is, you're like a bird straying from the nest, your focused attention is elsewhere and your wife and family, they get the left-overs. Men, that's a potent cause for an unhappy wife. So don't quit your posts. Your wife needs to know your heart and mind engaged involvement and attention in your marriage and family.

Now what if this is you? What if you know in your heart ladies that you are this argumentative wife, or men this bird that strays from its nest, or the two of you know that quarrelling has got a foothold in your marriage? What can you do?

Well, firstly these kind of issues are not an excuse to escape, that's not what the proverbs about deserts and corners of roofs are about. It's a life-long covenant and life-long covenant faithfulness means faithfulness even in the hard times, and at times that will mean serious examination of our own hearts. It may require repentance, a decision to turn away from hurtful or sinful behaviours or responses. It may need you to humble yourself and apologise to your spouse, the very thing so many of us find the most difficult. And it will need a committed desire to ask God for His help to change your heart and attitudes and his power and strength to live in that change as you address the issues you face together.

But secondly, there is the promise of God's restoring grace. And those of you who have been through marriages that have fallen apart, either your own or your parents, or those of you fighting to stay together now need to hear this. You see Christ did not come to lay down his life for a perfect bride. He came to lay down his life for a broken, helpless bride, and to make out of that stained people a perfect spotless bride. And the hope for messed up lives and for all our marriages is the hope of the gospel. It's the hope of the cross of Christ, where the justice of God meets the mercy and grace and forgiveness of God. It's where sin is called sin, but where there is grace and mercy enough to cover every sin. And it's the hope of the resurrection where God brings new life from the dead through the power of His Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

So you don't need to run to the housetop or to the desert; instead, everyone of us needs to run to the cross, where Christ laid down his life for his bride, the church.

But in closing I want to show you what Proverbs has to say about an excellent marriage.

### **An Excellent Marriage**

Read Proverbs 31:10-31.

As we finish this morning I want to draw your attention to why this woman we've just read about thrives, because she clearly does, and the reason is, that this excellent wife is in an excellent marriage. And it's a marriage where these principles we've looked at are getting worked out. She's one happy lady with one happy husband in one happy marriage. Let's see why that is so:

1. Her orientation is homeward. She's working away, she's trading, she's got this little industry going and people working under her, but notice it's all about home and family. And she and her man are not living independent of each other: these two are a team. And what they do all feeds back into their marriage and family.

2. Men, her husband trusts her; he trusts her with his wealth, with the home, with the children, and with his reputation. His trust in her oozes out of the passage, this woman is no squashed little wifey.

3. Her husband values her. I hesitate to call her a possession, she's obviously not, but she is his most treasured and valuable possession and he knows that. He

esteems her as that, he cherishes her as that. That's not just head knowledge for him it's his heart knowledge.

4. She's not bad-mouthing him. There's no hint of complaint or lack of contentment in her man here. In fact the opposite is the case. In v23 it says 'he is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land'. So far from this woman being a shame to her husband and rottenness in his bones people pay attention to this man because his wife is something special. Whatever the opposite of undermining her husband is, she does it.

5. The feeling's mutual because not only does he value her in his heart, he tells her that. Men, her husband blesses and praises her. This husband delights in his wife and she knows it, because he opens his mouth: v29 'Many have done excellently, but you surpass them all'. A friend of ours back in the UK got a mother's day card from her 20 year old son last year that read 'you're the best mother I've ever had'. Which is a sort of compliment, but this man let's his wife know that she surpasses any wife any man has ever had. Men, don't just work out how much she's worth to you and keep it to yourself, tell her!

6. Their marriage is built on the firmest foundation: and it's way more than emotional love or physical attraction: it's the fear of the Lord. V30: 'Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised'. That's what her man sees in her, admires in her, loves about her. This woman fears God, the foundation of what it means to live life with skill, she loves God so much that she fears to sin against him. And the husband says 'that's my wife!'. And men, that's not just for wives. Proverbs 14:26 says to husbands and fathers 'In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge.'

If the two of you learn and live out what it means to fear God, your kids may not have everything, but they will have a spiritual, emotional physical refuge. And if the two of you get on the same page and love God so much you fear him, fear to sin, fear to grieve the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ is your treasure and you value Him above everything, above your rights, your pleasure, your career, that will be a refuge for your family and your marriage. That is the strong, enduring foundation Proverbs says to build your marriage upon.