

A Woman Who Fears the Lord Is to Be Praised

by John Piper

A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised because she is not anxious about the future, has practical wisdom, and is strong.

Duration: 33:52

Scripture: Exodus 20:18-20, Proverbs 31:28, Proverbs 31:30

Topics: "Fear Of God", "Gratitude And Praise"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher uses a personal anecdote to illustrate the fear of God. He describes a situation where a dog chases after someone who runs away from it, comparing it to how God pursues those who run away from Him. The preacher then shifts the focus to the importance of cherishing loved ones and not taking them for granted. He emphasizes the need to be grateful and to focus on the positive aspects of life rather than being critical. Finally, the preacher discusses the significance of praising women who fear the Lord, stating that it not only feels good but also honors God.

Transcript

A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. In 1966, I happened on a girl and spent two years of pondering the value of that pearl. She has a face and heart all full of love and filling, and so I sold my singleness, all fifty years, God willing.

And I have never once looked back for fear of what I missed. If ever God was good to me, it was the wedding kiss. Four years and happy were the first, without a child to bless.

And so we cultivated joy and fields of faithfulness. Then, like a mighty let there be from Genesis page one, another soul was born on earth, and we beheld a son. But I had eyes for something more, to watch God make another.

Out of a girl, my college pearl, I watched him make a mother. A kind of revelation this, just as the ancients say, how much of Christ there is to see in her maternal way. Eight years and two more happy sons, all priceless to the minute, are like an unrolled open scroll with God's own message in it.

Charm is deceitful, beauty vain, though all the world has gazed. But when a woman fears the Lord, she shall be truly praised. The text for this morning is Proverbs 31, verse 30.

Charm is deceitful, beauty vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Let's notice the context, first of all. It's a very unusual one.

You all know what an acrostic is, right? 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, her heart of purest gold. E is for her eyes of love, light shining. R means right, and right she'll always be.

That's an acrostic. And that's exactly what we've got here in Proverbs 31, 10 to 31. It's an acrostic.

Every verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Why do people write acrostics? Well, people write acrostics, don't they? Because they're just so full inside, they want to think up as many different things to say about somebody as they can. Now, the writer here in Proverbs 31 has set himself a task, namely, to praise the woman who fears the Lord.

Well, how's he going to do that? He says, no, I'll just list the letters of the alphabet and then I'll think up a different thing, 22 different things to say about this woman. O is for woman, full of virtue. B refers to trust her husband shares.

G is for work she does to help you. D stands for how she sells her wares, and on and on he goes for 22 verses. That's what an acrostic is, and I think that's why we write them.

And that's important to see because that tips us off that he's not arguing like Paul did, say, in Romans. He's not building up logical step after logical step. Instead, he's stringing pearls of things to say about this woman who fears the Lord.

And so I think that a sermon that comes from this text ought to aim at these three things. One, it ought to inspire women to fear the Lord as one thing it ought to do and to be like this woman here in the way she fulfilled her role. Now, this woman's married, obviously, and is a good wife.

But when I say be the way she is and fulfill your role the way she fulfilled hers, I think the implication extends to all women. And I'm basically addressing all women this morning. Second, I think a message that comes from this text ought to inspire others to praise such women.

And then third, the message ought to include some of that praise, which is why I begin with my ode to Noel, because she's the woman I know best and a woman who fears the Lord. Now, to accomplish those other two goals, I want to ask three questions, try to answer them. One, what does it mean to fear the Lord? Two, why is it so important to praise women who fear the Lord? And three, how can you recognize a woman who fears the Lord? What does it look like in action? Charm is deceitful, beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

So what does it mean, then, to fear the Lord? Let's go back to the beginning of Israel's national history, to the very foundation statements that were made there at Mount Sinai. Exodus chapter 20, verse 18. Here's what Moses says.

Now, when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet in the mountains smoking, the people were afraid and trembled. And they stood afar off and said to Moses, You speak to us and we will hear, but let not God speak to us, lest we die. And Moses said to the people, Do

not fear, for God has come to prove you that the fear of him may always be before your eyes, that you may not sin.

Oh, how we need to meditate on perplexing texts like that. They seem so paradoxical. Don't be afraid.

Keep the fear of the Lord before your eyes. What does that mean? I think that the text provides the distinctions we need in order to make sense of it. When he says, don't fear, get rid of fear, the fear he's telling them to get rid of is the fear of drawing near to the Lord Mount Sinai, listening to him close up.

The fear that they are to keep before them is the fear of God's powerful wrath against sin. A fear of kindling God's wrath against sin ought to drive us not away from the Lord, but to the Lord where there's mercy. Last week, Noel and I went to the Teagans for a visit.

Now, the Teagans have a big dog and he's chained up out in the front yard. And if you get out of your car, he greets you. They're very big.

He's about as tall as Benjamin. And she took care of the dog. We went inside and the dog was a different dog inside, scratching behind the ears, play with him.

Then we decided to go outside again. Carsten was going to go to the car and get something. And Irene said, don't run from the dog.

And Carsten starts off to the car. And the dog kind of trots up behind him. Just soft.

He looks back, see this dog about eye level and starts to run. And the dog gets mad. Don't run, Carsten.

Settle the dog down. What a picture of the fear of God, isn't it? Now, Irene was Moses standing on the porch. Here's the Israelites, the Piper family.

And the word comes from Moses, do not fear to draw near. But don't run from God. Don't leave God and go into the way of sin.

He gets angry if you run away from him. A beautiful picture. God is a joy to be near.

He loves to be scratched behind the ears. But you run from God and he will pursue you viciously. I think that is a beautiful picture of what Moses meant.

Now, the analogy breaks down because Irene put the dog in the basement and you can't do that to God. If you are running from God because you are afraid of him, you aren't nearly afraid enough. If you are running away from God because you are afraid of him, you have not yet feared him as you ought.

In fact, your flight is a mockery of him, isn't it? Presuming to think that you can outrun that German shepherd. No, you can't. If you really fear him and love your own life, you will stop running, turn around, hug his neck and he'll lick your face.

That's the way God is. Fear to flee from the Lord your God into the way of sin. Let fear draw you near.

And then you will have peace and security and hope. It keeps us near to the merciful heart of God. That's what fear does, where God can be our fortress and our refuge and our son and our shield.

Isaiah 813 says the Lord of hosts, let him be your fear, let him be your dread, and he will become a sanctuary. Therefore, there are tremendous promises attending those who fear the Lord. Just listen to a few of these from the Psalms.

Psalm 25, 14. The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him. He makes known to them his covenant.

Psalm 31, 19. How abundant is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for those who fear thee and wrought for those who take refuge in thee. You see the parallel.

If you fear him, you will run up to him and take refuge in him. Psalm 34, 7. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. Psalm 103, 11.

As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him. Verse 13. As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him.

He licks their face. Psalm 145, 19. He fulfills the desire of all those who fear him.

The promises that God makes to those who fear him are so staggering that a summons to fear the Lord and a summons to hope in the Lord are inseparable. And that's why the psalmist says things like this. The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his mercy.

The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his mercy. So a woman who fears the Lord will not run away from God to satisfy her longings or to escape her anxieties. She will wait for the Lord.

She will hope in the Lord. She will stay close to the heart of God and trust his promises. The prospect of running away from God into the way of sin will be so fearful that she will not pursue it.

And the prospect and the benefits of staying close to God in the shadow of the Almighty will be so glorious that she will not be able to forsake it. Charm is deceitful. Beauty is vain.

But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Why? Why should we be so busy praising such women? I think there are three reasons at least. One, it feels good.

Two, it honors God. Three, it strengthens her hand in the Lord. First of all, it feels good.

Psalm 37, verse 4 says, delight yourself in the Lord. Now, I take that to mean not only that we should delight ourselves in the Lord, but that we should delight ourselves in everything that delights the Lord. And then, by implication, we should delight ourselves in women who fear God, because that surely is a delight to the Lord.

Now, what is praise? C.S. Lewis, in that delightful little book on the Psalms called Reflections on the Psalms, said that praise is not merely the expression of a joy or a delight. It's the completion or the consummation of that joy. A joy that is not expressed has not yet been fully enjoyed.

The joy I have in my wife mounts to its highest peak when I take the time and the effort to express it as well as I can in a poem, and then double it by reading it in the great congregation. And I feel so sorry that I'm the only person that gets to do that. If any of you men are just chomping at the bit to sing a song for your wives, you come back tonight and I'll let you have a chance.

All right? I mean that. My joy mounts to its peak when I not just delight in her virtue, but say it to her and to others. Then the joy has its consummation.

And therefore, a strong and a good motive for praising the woman who fears the Lord is because it completes the joy we have in such women. It feels good. Now, maybe I should mention just the flip side of that, the ugly alternative to not praising.

Lewis said, praise is inner health made audible. Inner health made audible. I've seen that borne out again and again in my experience.

The cranks and the misfits and the scrooges of the world are the sick people who never praise very much. There's that inner sickness that just issues up criticism and complaining and murmuring and sourness and bitterness and suspicion. And the joyless cloud just kind of hangs around their head.

And what I want to do with such people is just pick them up, including myself sometimes, and shake them and say, OK, OK, the world is rotten, right? There's a lot of sin and junk in the world and in every one of us. But now look, Jesus came into the world for sin. He died.

He rose again for this reason, so that the command rejoice always and in everything give thanks would not be naive pie in the sky, but would be intensely realistic. Now shape up and be a stop being so habitually hooked to criticism. And let's get hooked on praise.

Close quote. That's what I want to say to those people. That's the message I preach to myself when I find myself getting all critical about everything instead of looking at the beauties that God is making in the world and praising them.

Now, that's the first reason why we should praise women who fear the Lord. It feels good. Second, it honors God, which is the most important thing of all.

We mustn't think that in praising a woman who fears the Lord, we are robbing God of what belongs to him because. God has ordained things on the earth and has made things on the earth that are good and in praising what God has made and what by its very nature honors God, we praise God. There is an indirect way to praise God as well as a direct way to praise God.

And God delights very much in women who fear the Lord. And therefore, if we put our approval on them by praise, we simply are approving what God delights in and therefore praising God. Third, we ought to praise women who fear the Lord because it strengthens their hand in the Lord.

Now, suppose Carsten, instead of running when the dog trotted up behind, he stopped, turned around, look at the dog, went, let's go, starts off to the car with his arm around his dog's neck. And I said, Carsten, way to go. That's just the way to do it.

That's just what she meant. Right now, what effect would my words have had on Carsten? I think they would have strengthened his heart in the Lord or in Irene. And that's what we can do for each other, for the woman who praises or who fears the Lord.

There are so many temptations, full page ads in the Tribune, alluring women not to fear the Lord. But to fear financial insecurity, more to fear not being accepted with peers more than they fear God, to fear wasted time spent in good deeds instead of fearing God. We are all being tempted day after day to let go

of that German shepherd and run off after some silly poodle.

And therefore, we need to strengthen each other's hands in the Lord. We need to say, saintly people need to say, well done, I love the way you fear the Lord. And now listen, husbands and children, a word especially for you.

Verse 28 in our text, her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praises her. Children, listen to this. This is for you, old or young.

Let's think real serious for a minute. Suppose your mommy was killed tomorrow in a car wreck and on Thursday you had to go to her funeral. What would you wish on Thursday you had said today? Her children rise up and call her blessed.

I quoted that at my mother's funeral, thought of a lots of times that I had said it. Tell her today, guys, girls, 30 year olds, if you haven't done it yet, tell her today. And husbands, what about you? Put yourself in the same position.

If I lost my wife this week, you know what I'd say? I'd say, why did I get so upset at such stupid little things? Why did I make an issue of such non-essentials? Why did I let criticism and nitpicking dry up my expressions of gratitude and praise so often? So I will try to do better. Oh, how we need to live in the light of our dying. Like Glenn Ogren said to me on Wednesday, death puts everything in perspective.

So husbands, praise her, praise her, praise her while you have her, and you will strengthen her hand in God, you will honor the Lord, and you will add great joy to your own life. And now finally, the third question and last one that I want to ask, how can you identify such a woman? What does she look like in daily life? I think that's what verses 10 to 31 are all about here. He's trying to just spill out all the sorts of things that a woman who fears the Lord does.

And I just want to mention four things. There could be a lot more. Four things to celebrate about women who fear the Lord and about my own wife.

First of all, a woman who fears the Lord is not anxious about the future. Look at verse 25. I love this line.

It is a great line. Strength and dignity are her clothing. She laughs at the time to come.

Isn't that beautiful? She laughs at tomorrow. Now, Satan dangles in front of every woman the specter of tomorrow's troubles. But the woman who fears the Lord will glance up at her big German shepherd beside her, and then she will turn back and laugh at Satan's folly.

She will fulfill Proverbs 14, 26. In the fear of the Lord, one has great confidence and his children will have a refuge. Her fear of the Lord makes her fearless of men, but it doesn't make her naive.

She knows that the Lord has appointed certain means for our safety. For example, verse 21. She's not afraid of snow for her household.

Why? Because all her household are clothed in scarlet. Winter is a deadly and fearful thing in Minnesota. At least it used to be.

When I came here, I had no idea it was a matter of life and death whether your car ran out of gas at 11 o'clock at night. I really got scared one night when on highway 100 at 1130 my car ran out of gas. I had to

climb a fence, walk a quarter of a mile, and I had three people in that car, one of them a teeny baby, and I was scared.

Winter is a fearful thing, but God has appointed that we not just pray that our feet not freeze, we're supposed to wear shoes. You see, we're supposed to clothe ourselves appropriately, and women who fear the Lord know that, and they busy themselves doing what God has ordained us to do, and not being naïve and thinking that since I have the good shepherd, I don't have to wear shoes. So we are to be fearless of tomorrow, yet doing the things God has appointed us to do, trusting his mercy in all our ways.

Secondly, the woman who fears the Lord has practical wisdom. Verse 26. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

We've all been taught from the time we were little, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and therefore, of course, the woman who fears the Lord is going to speak wisdom, right? That's no surprise. And isn't there a very close connection between being free from anxiety about the future and having lips that speak wisdom? See if you agree with this. This has been my experience anyway.

The wisest people I know, the people whose counsel I take most seriously, are the people who have quieted their souls, like a child quieted at its mother's breast, who are not fretful and anxious about the future. But the anxious people, the people who are most tense, the most uptight, their counsel I do not trust. They have not discovered what I need.

Women, there is a wisdom that your family, your friends, and your associates need, and it can only come out of a heart that laughs at the future, because it fears the Lord. Thirdly, a woman who fears the Lord is strong. Verse 25, strength and dignity are her clothing.

Verse 17, she girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong. I think the strength mentioned here is the whole array of strength. She is morally strong.

Proverbs 23, 17 says, let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord. In other words, if you're in the fear of the Lord, you will be powerful not to envy. You will not be easily allured and blown about by the allurements of the world and the evil one.

You will have strength of soul, moral strength that comes from fearing the Lord. But also, I think it implies that the woman who fears the Lord will increase in intellectual strength. The fear of the Lord is the impulse to wisdom.

It rouses the mind to seek after knowledge as for hidden treasure. And thirdly, I think it means even that the woman who fears the Lord will increase in physical strength, though we may be of various kinds of strength. For example, I have discovered that the reason people often, one of the reasons people often languish and let their bodies get out of tone is because they're bored and they are frustrated and the future looks bleak and they have no excitement or no hope or no confidence about tomorrow.

And so just let yourself go today. But on the other hand, the woman who fears the Lord looks into the future and is confident, hopeful, eager to walk with this great German shepherd into the future. And that kind of hope and confidence brings pep and vigor and even causes physical strength to increase even among the weakest of us.

Fourthly and finally, a woman who fears the Lord will live not for herself alone, but for others, especially for her husband if she's married. Verses 11 and 12. Make this your aim and your husband will be very happy.

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. A woman who fears the Lord does not squander the family's livelihood on frivolous purchases, but will have the complete trust of her husband because she is for him and not against him.

Whenever possible, according to this text, she will supplement the income. But let me give a word here of the thing that I think is most important. At least perhaps this reflects my husband perspective.

I'm not so eager to have Noel's financial health. In fact, I don't want it at this point at all. But I am very eager to have another kind of support.

Far more important is the moral support of a wife. Did verse 23 strike you as being out of place in a hymn to womanhood? Verse 23 says, her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land. Why are you talking about the husband all of a sudden? I think Proverbs 12, 4 gives the answer.

Proverbs 12, 4 says, a good wife is a crown to her husband, but she who brings shame is the rottenness of his bones. A wife who fears the Lord will increase the esteem of her husband in the gates. For 12 and a half years of marriage, Noel has never done or said anything in public that would have caused me to be ashamed.

She has my absolute trust as a representative of what our family stands for. There is no place, no group of people in all the world where I would be ashamed to go with Noel at my side. She is a crown to my head, a signet ring on my right hand, because she is for me 100 percent, because she is a woman who fears the Lord.

And I praise God every day for her. And my prayer is that every wife here might give her husband that kind of moral support. One last remark about this woman who fears the Lord, whether she is married or unmarried, she lives for the needy.

Verse 20, she opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy. God has drawn near to her and met her need, and now she draws near to others to meet their needs. And you know this woman is well-to-do, don't you? This is a rich woman.

This is a high-class woman. And it is beautiful to see that she does not let her station in life keep her from associating with the lowly. She doesn't just hand money, she reaches out her hands to the needy.

Charm is deceitful, beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. In summary, she keeps the fear of the Lord before her eyes. That is, she keeps before her eyes what a fearful and terrible prospect it would be to run away into the way of sin instead of staying close to the mercy of her Heavenly Father.

She should be praised, especially by us husbands and children, because that will make us happy, honor God, and strengthen her hand in the Lord. And she can be recognized because she is confident and not anxious. Gracious wisdom is upon her lips.

She girds herself with strength, and she supports her husband and extends her hands to the needy. Now, I don't know of any hymn to praise a woman who fears the Lord. So I want you to stand right now, and

we'll close by having you repeat this stanza from my poem with me, and then we'll conclude.

You repeat each line after me, and this will be our corporate praise to the woman who fears the Lord. Charm is deceitful, beauty vain. Though all the world has gazed, but when a woman fears the Lord, she shall be truly praised.

Amen. You're dismissed.

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